

SECRET SERVICE

OLD AND YOUNG KING BRADY, DETECTIVES.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post-Office, March 1, 1899, by Frank Tansy.

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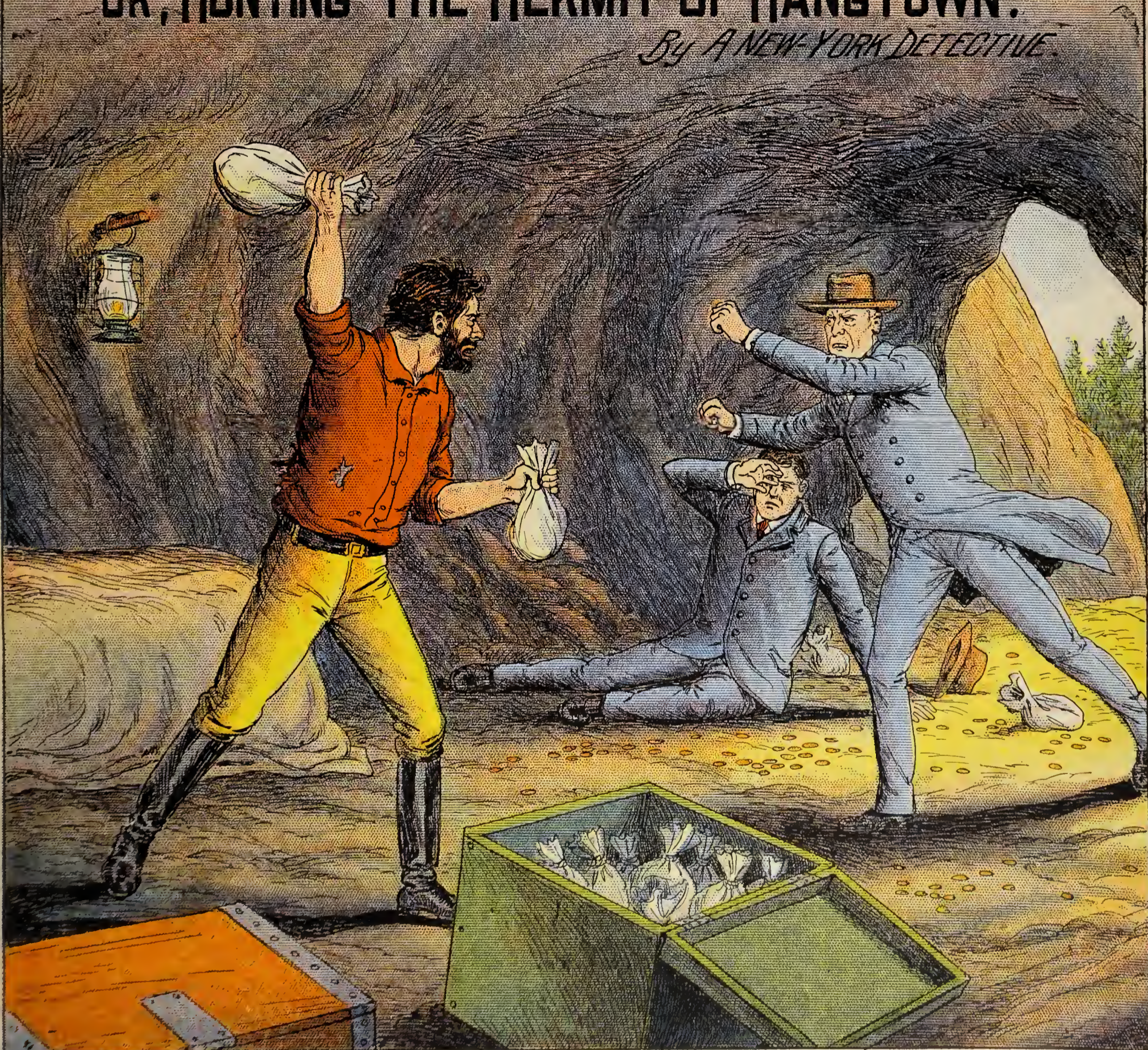
NEW YORK, JUNE 22, 1906.

Price 5 Cents.

THE BRADYS AND 'BADMAN BILL';

OR, HUNTING THE HERMIT OF HANGTOWN.

By A NEW-YORK DETECTIVE.



Harry got the bag on the forehead and fell, the gold scattering over the floor of the cave. "Hold on there, you fiend! No more of that or you are a dead one!" shouted

Old King Brady, darting forward.

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NEW YORK, JUNE 22, 1906.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BRADYS START FOR HANGTOWN.

One June morning, several years ago, two gentlemen emerged from the once famous Lick House, in the now desolated city of San Francisco, and struck up Montgomery street to Jackson, where they entered the handsome marble building of the Wells Fargo Express Co.

The one was an elderly man, the other a handsome young fellow of less than twenty.

The older man was of peculiar appearance, due principally to his odd style of dress.

He wore a long blue coat of unique cut, with a double row of flat brass buttons down the front in the old-time style.

His hat was an immense broad-brimmed white affair of the cowboy type.

About the neck was an ancient "stock" and high, pointed, stand-up collar, fashion of 1840.

A man of such marked appearance could scarcely fail to attract attention, and many turned to look at him.

And it is safe to assert that more than one recognized him as Old King Brady, the world-famous detective, whose face was quite as familiar on Market street of San Francisco as it is upon Broadway, New York.

It is scarcely necessary to mention that the younger man was the pupil and partner of the old detective—Young King Brady, as the world knows him, Harry, as he is styled by his associate.

While working on a Chinese case in San Francisco the Bradys had received a call from the Wells Fargo Co., by whom they are frequently employed.

Having finished their case, they were now here to answer the call.

The Bradys went up on the elevator, and presented themselves at the office of Mr. Montague, the general manager of the express company.

They were kept waiting but a few minutes.

Mr. Montague received Old King Brady as a man receives an old friend.

"It is so fortunate that you happened to be in the city," he said. "It was only yesterday that I heard by the merest accident that you were here. We want to send you up to Hangtown at once."

"You mean Placerville, up in Eldorado county?" inquired Old King Brady, naming the California town which in former days passed by the peculiar name mentioned.

"No; naturally you would suppose so," was the reply. "But this is a modern Hangtown, away up in the wilds of Washington. Its real name is Riddle, but up there everyone calls the place Hangtown, on account of some tough characters who were lynched there at the time that part of the country was first opened up."

"Where in Washington is it located?" inquired Old King Brady.

"It is away up in the north country, near Mount Baker," was the reply. "You go in from Cokedale. It is a sixty-mile stage ride, I am told. Cokedale, you know, is at the end of a branch where there are coal mines and coking furnaces. It is a very wild country, Mr. Brady. I hope you are good for such a journey."

"Perfectly good for it. Let us know what it is all about."

"Well," continued Mr. Montague, "the case is an old one. Perhaps you may remember that five years ago our special stage from the mining region beyond Mt. Baker to the railroad was held up and robbed of over half a million by a solitary masked man, who shot the driver and our messenger, the only two persons on board."

"I think I do. We were in Mexico at the time, if I am not mistaken, and could not undertake the case."

"Exactly. Some of our local detectives handled it, and the crime was traced directly to a miserable renegade known as "Badman Bill," last name unknown, who had been a local pest for several years."

"I remember. Fellow was half crazy. He burned the stage. The driver was not dead when found, but died soon after. Badman Bill was tracked into the mountains back of Hangtown. There his coat, hat, and shoes were found at the edge of a frightful precipice, and it was believed that he threw himself down into the gorge in a fit of insanity."

"Right. I see you know all about the affair. We had the best of reason to believe that this lunatic—for such he certainly was—had thrown the gold down first. The gorge is nearly inaccessible. A rapid stream runs through it. Later we had men let down by ropes. They found our treasure box empty, and the skeleton of a man picked clean by the wolves lodged upon rocks just above the stream. The remains were believed to be those of Badman Bill. It was thought that the gold had been washed away by the stream; at all events, we recovered none of it, and the matter was allowed to drop."

"And why has it come up again?"

"Because Bill has twice been seen in the mountains in

the neighborhood of Hangtown by a young fellow named Kit Burns, a prospector."

"Sure there is no mistake?"

"Positive. Our agent at Hangtown writes us that Burns not only saw Badman Bill and talked with him, but that Bill exhibited a bag of gold nuggets and boasted that he had a hundred more like it. He wanted Burns to come and live with him in his hut, and promised to make him rich if he would do so."

"It is a wonder the fellow didn't consent."

"He claimed to have been afraid; Bill was so wild-looking. The second time Bill turned on him when he refused, and fired at him, afterwards making his escape in the woods."

"And what is wanted of us is to recover this treasure, of course."

"That is it. If you can't solve the problem and get us the gold no one can."

"Probably you have other reasons for believing the gold to be intact, or nearly so."

"We have. This man, it appears, has been seen by others. He has been living the life of a hermit, and has thus acquired the name of the 'Hermit of Hangtown.' Our agent had often heard of this hermit, but he had no notion that he was our old Badman Bill."

"We will take hold," replied Old King Brady. "Of course, we can't guarantee the gold, but if the man is to be got we will get him."

"I'm sure of it," was the reply.

There was some further discussion as to ways and means, after which the detectives left.

Late that afternoon the Bradys started north.

Their run to Washington was accomplished without delay, and on the evening of the second day they turned up at Cokeville.

This was, without exception, the dreariest place the Bradys had ever struck.

Its only excuse for existence were certain coal mines and coking furnaces in the vicinity, as has been said.

It had been arranged that the Wells Fargo agent at Cokeville should have horses ready for the detectives, and they proposed to start at once for Hangtown.

There were, however, no horses to be seen around the station.

A few grimy looking miners were gathered about the building ready to welcome three newcomers of their own class.

Besides these men and the Bradys the only person who left the train was a young girl of considerable beauty, who carried a small dress-suit case made of woven straw.

She stood looking about anxiously.

Apparently she had been expecting someone, and did not know what to do.

The station agent, a mere boy, was about closing the building for the night, when she stepped up and spoke to him.

His answer was gruff, and the girl drew back abashed.

"Look here, Governor, that girl is in trouble. Hadn't you better take her in hand?" Harry said.

"Your job. You handle the young and beautiful women," was the reply.

"Come now!" laughed Harry. "What about you doing the fatherly—or shall we say grandfatherly act?"

"Go!" replied the old detective. "I'll wait here. The young for the young should be the rule."

Harry stepped up to the young girl and raised his hat.

Meanwhile both the miners and the station agent had departed, and they had the place to themselves.

"Were you looking for anyone, miss?" asked Young King Brady. "We are strangers here ourselves, but if we can be of any assistance——"

"I was expecting my brother to meet me," replied the girl. "He is Mr. Arthur Wandell, of the Kicking Mule mine up at Hangtown. If he don't come I really don't know what I shall do."

Old King Brady now came forward.

He had only been joking. He had no idea of turning his back on the girl.

"Your brother may be over at the hotel—we can see over there," he said. "Will you accompany us. Our name is Brady. We are bound for Hangtown ourselves."

"I really don't know what to do," answered the girl. "Arthur cannot be in town, or he would be here now."

"He may have been a trifle late. It is a long drive from Hangtown."

"You know him then, gentlemen?"

"We do not," replied Harry. "We are strangers here ourselves."

"I—I think I better stay at the station," stammered the girl, with some confusion. "I don't see how I can go to the hotel."

"But you can't stay here," replied Old King Brady. "Night is coming on, and the station is locked. Tell me freely what the trouble is, just as you would to your father. Is there any particular reason why you don't want to go to the hotel?"

"Well, sir, there is," replied the girl, blushing deeply. "To be honest with you, I have managed to lose my pocketbook, and I haven't a cent."

"Unfortunate, but easily remedied," said the detective. "Pray consider me your banker for the time being, Miss Wandell. I can settle with your brother later on."

With some further hesitation the girl accepted this kind offer, and Harry having relieved her of her dress-suit case they crossed the broad open space and entered the Baker House.

Old King Brady turned Miss Wandell over to the housekeeper, and went to the office with Harry, where he explained the situation to the clerk.

"I know Mr. Wandell very well," said the clerk. "We don't need your guarantee. We will take good care of the young lady until her brother comes. The chances are he has been detained on the road."

"Do you know Mr. Cook?" inquired Old King Brady.

"You mean the Wells Fargo agent here?"

"Yes."

"I did know him. He is dead."

"Hello!" cried the old detective. "He was alive day before yesterday, then."

"He was, indeed. He was thrown from his horse this afternoon and instantly killed," replied the clerk.

Here was a setback at the very start.

The Bradys discussed the situation, and concluded that they had no reason for calling on the widow of the unfortunate man.

They accordingly went to supper and afterwards tried to find horses.

This proved to be impossible.

There was no livery stable at Cokeville, and no one had horses for sale or to hire.

The Hangtown stage had gone, and the next would not leave Cokeville until late the following afternoon.

The Bradys returned to the hotel convinced that they were up against delay.

They had scarcely entered the office when a young man came up to them with extended hand.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but if I don't mistake you are the Brady detectives," he said.

"We are," replied Old King Brady.

"My name is Wandell. I have just come in from Hangtown."

"Ah! Your sister——"

"I have just left her, and I wish to thank you heartily for your kindness to her."

"It is nothing."

"Indeed, it was much. Bella is a timid girl. Her home is in Portland, Oregon. She has never been away before. Our mother died recently, and as there are only the two of us left Bella is coming to Hangtown to keep house for me."

"Which I have no doubt will prove a good arrangement. We are going to Hangtown ourselves if we can find any way of getting there."

"I was just coming to that. It seems that the unfortunate Mr. Cook, to whom you were consigned, was killed this afternoon."

"So we hear. A sad affair."

"Very, as he leaves several children. He was not able to get hold of any horses for you, so he telephoned Mr. Muldoon, the agent at Hangtown, to send over after you. It was the same trouble there, and Muldoon requested me to drive you over. I have brought along a big, double-seated wagon, and as I intend to start at once, there need be no delay."

"It suits us all right, Mr. Wandell," replied Old King Brady, greatly relieved. "But do you intend to go to-night with your sister? It seems rather an undertaking."

"It is absolutely necessary that I should be at the mine where I work to-morrow. I must go," was the reply.

"Oh, in that case——"

"It is all arranged. The night is warm. Bella will not suffer. I shall start within half an hour if you are ready."

It is unnecessary to say that the Bradys were ready, and so it came about that half an hour later found the detectives seated in the wagon with Mr. Wandell and his sister on the road to Hangtown.

CHAPTER II.

THE ACCIDENT AT THE BRIDGE.

The Bradys found young Mr. Wandell a splendid type of Western manhood.

As for his sister, it really looked as if Harry might become seriously smitten.

The girl was bright and most intelligent, and now, feeling herself at home in the presence of her brother, Harry found her a most entertaining companion.

Arthur Wandell informed the detectives that he was head assayer at the Kicking Mule gold mine, and he dwelt upon the richness of the claim.

Their way for the first ten miles led them directly through the forest.

After that they crossed a small stream, and began the ascent of a series of foothills of considerable height beyond which lay the range of which Mt. Baker is the highest peak, towering to a height of 10,719 feet above sea level, and covered with eternal snow.

The detectives had a continuous view of this noble peak in the moonlight for the first ten miles.

But when they entered the foothills they lost it.

The horses now settling down into a walk, Old King Brady, who rode on the front seat with Wandell, began to question him a bit.

"Is our coming to Hangtown generally known?" he inquired.

"Certainly it is," was the reply. "Everybody is talking about it."

"So? And our business there is known?"

"Of course. You are out gunning after the fellow folks call the Hermit of Hangtown."

"I see that our affairs have been talked about. It is impossible to keep a secret in Hangtown, it would appear."

"I guess you are right," replied Wandell, with a laugh. "It's only a small place, and has its share of gossip. They believe now that the Hermit is Badman Bill, the fellow who robbed the Wells Fargo stage five years ago."

"That's it. What do you know about the man?"

"Not a thing personally. The robbery happened before my time, you see. He never shows himself in town, but he has been seen in the mountains by quite a number of people."

"Do we cross these mountains?"

"Yes; we pass right through them on the home stretch."

"Wild region?"

"Wildest in the world."

"Good chance for prospecting?"

"Every chance; but somehow very few have tried it. This young Burns has been at it of late, but he hasn't found anything yet. The Hermit gave him such a scare last week that I hardly think he will tackle the hills again in a hurry."

There was further talk on these lines.

But what Arthur Wandell had to tell was of little value to the detectives.

Old King Brady plainly saw that they had undertaken the roughest sort of a task.

From the foothills they went down into a deep valley, and at last started through a wild, romantic pass up into the range.

"It is only twenty miles now," announced Wandell. "Perhaps, Bella, you would like to get out and take a rest for half an hour or so."

"I should think your team would need a rest," said Old King Brady.

"No; these horses are good for the whole run, if it comes to a pinch," was the reply. "But it will do them no harm to have a rest."

Bella favored stopping, and half an hour was put in at the mouth of the pass.

A fresh start was then taken, and for an hour they continued to ascend.

Dawn came just as they reached the highest point, and the Bradys were treated to such a view as cannot be had in any other part of the world.

Now they descended into a deep canyon.

The road was fearfully steep, and Wandell had to put on the brakes.

Every moment it seemed as if the swaying wagon must topple over into the yawning gulf alongside of them.

Bella held on for dear life, and more than once frantically clutched Harry's arm.

At last the end of this stretch was reached, and they came to the brink of the stream which they had been following at the bottom of the gorge.

Here this gorge cut directly across their trail, which now entered a cross canyon of considerable width.

Over the stream, which was forty feet down, a flimsy bridge extended.

Old King Brady sized it up at a glance, and tried to call a halt.

"Why, that bridge is positively dangerous," he cried. "See how the supports have sagged."

"It does look worse than usual," assented Wandell. "It ought to be repaired, of course, but I don't think there is the slightest danger."

"I wish I could agree with you, but I can't," replied Old King Brady. "Stop, please! My partner and I walk across."

Wandell laughed good-naturedly.

"Oh, I will do as you wish, of course," he said. "But believe me, Mr. Brady, there isn't the least danger."

"I never take any chances of this sort," was the reply.

Wandell stopped his team, and the detectives got out.

"Are you going to walk with us, miss?" Old King Brady asked.

"I will do just as my brother says," replied Bella, loyally.

"Sit still, then," said Wandell. "You are as safe there as you would be on foot."

And with this he started his horses across the bridge at a brisk trot.

They had just about reached the middle of the crazy structure when, without one warning crack, it suddenly collapsed.

"Good heavens!" gasped Harry.

Bella's scream was something to be long remembered.

Down went the bridge into the gorge, carrying the team with it, leaving the Bradys half paralyzed with the shock of the moment standing at the brink.

Now, all this has taken longer in the telling than it did in the happening.

The latter was a matter of seconds only.

Horried beyond measure, the Bradys bent over the break and looked down.

The stream did not nearly fill the gorge.

Great masses of rock lay piled up on either side.

The wagon had fallen into the water, which was shallow and rapid.

The horses did not move. It was easy to see that they were dead.

The wagon had turned partly over, and lay on its side.

The Bradys could not see young Wandell, but as they looked Bella rose up in the water.

She threw her hands wildly above her head, and called out something which the detectives could not catch, owing to the noise of the water rushing over the stones.

"Are you hurt?" yelled Harry.

"Brother!" was the only word they could catch in reply.

"We must get down there and rescue that poor girl!" cried Old King Brady.

"If it can be done! Why didn't the fool listen to you?" replied Harry.

"No time to talk of that now," cried the old detective. "Follow me."

He ran along the brink of the gorge, looking for a place to descend.

It was necessary to go a considerable distance before such an opportunity was discovered.

"I think we might get down here," said Old King Brady, halting at last.

"You stay where you are, Governor. I'll try it," cried Harry.

"No, no! We will both go."

"But it is nonsense. I shall want your help to pull the girl up here. There is no sense in both of us risking our lives."

Old King Brady yielded more readily than he sometimes does.

The fact was, he began to have serious doubts about his ability to get down.

So he let Harry go, and he started back to a point where he could get a view of what was going on after his partner safely reached the bed of the stream.

This took him several hundred yards, owing to the bend of the gorge.

Suddenly Old King Brady was startled by a piercing scream.

Shriek followed shriek, and he knew that it must be Bella.

He bent over the edge, and tried to get a view, but it was impossible.

Then suddenly there was a shot, and then another.

Harry's voice was heard shouting, but Old King Brady could not catch the words.

"What on earth has happened?" he asked himself. "This is dreadful! I can't stand it! I must go down!"

He dashed back to where Harry had descended.

In the nervous condition into which these events had thrown him, Old King Brady almost hesitated to make the attempt.

But he conquered his fears, and hanging by his hands, gained standing room on the rocks below.

Then followed a dangerous descent of some thirty feet.

This brought him upon the loose stones just above the bed of the stream.

Old King Brady then picked his way over the stones, making all the speed possible.

At last he rounded the bend, and caught sight of Harry in the distance.

He was considerably beyond the wagon, running on over the stones.

Old King Brady shouted, but could not make himself heard.

In a few seconds Harry disappeared around another bend of the gorge.

It was hopeless to think of following him.

Old King Brady could not imagine what had happened.

Mystery seemed to have followed disaster.

All the old detective could do was to push on to the wagon.

As he drew near he pulled out the powerful glass which he always carries, and adjusting it to his eyes looked ahead.

Young Wandell lay in the water, with his head out, resting upon a flat stone.

"He's a dead one," muttered Old King Brady, restoring the glass to his pocket. "So much for his foolhardy stubbornness. But what on earth can have happened to his sister beats me."

CHAPTER III.

THE SEARCH WHICH FAILED.

Old King Brady hurried on, and soon came up with the wreck.

The horses were dead.

They had broken their necks by the fall, and it was doubtful if they survived an instant.

Heedless of wet feet, the old detective went out into the stream over the slippery stones, and reached the place where young Wandell lay.

He bent down over him instantly, discovering that the young man still breathed.

"We must get you out of here, that's a certainty," muttered the detective.

He got his arms beneath Wandell's body, and tried to raise him.

But although the assayer was not a particularly large man, and Old King Brady is a particularly strong one, it was all dead weight, and he could not manage to straighten up under his load.

"Can't be done," he muttered.

That was the time he wanted Harry.

Looking up the gorge he now saw him running back over the rocks.

Old King Brady remained where he was near the unconscious man.

"What happened? Where is the girl?" he shouted, when Harry drew near enough to hear him.

"Carried off by a wildman!" yelled Harry, in answer with his hand against his mouth.

"Heavens!" thought Old King Brady. "What if it should be our hermit? Strange coincidence that would be."

"He made no further effort to communicate with Harry until he came up.

"Where did they go?" he then demanded.

"That is just what I don't know," panted Harry.

The girl was standing just about where I am now, only her feet were in the water. All of a sudden I saw the strangest looking fellow you ever laid eyes on appear on the bank. The girl gave a scream, and he made a dart for her. He caught her around the waist, and in spite of her struggles threw her over on his back, just as a man would throw a bag of meal, and off he went."

"You fired?"

"Yes; in the air and at his legs. I didn't dare to try for his head, for fear I would hit the girl."

"And where did you see them last?"

"Going around that bend there. You see, I was a good way off, and although I made all the haste I could I wasn't quick enough. When I got around they were gone. I went on quite a distance, and looked everywhere, but I could not find hide nor hair of them. I'm sure I don't know where they went."

"It may have been our Hangtown hermit, Harry."

"Just what I was thinking myself, by gracious! But it can't be helped now. What about this poor chap? Is he dead?"

"No. We may save him. Help me carry him out of this."

It was easy enough for two.

The Bradys laid the sufferer down upon a big flat rock, with Harry's coat under his head.

Old King Brady is considerable of a doctor in his way. He always carries with him certain simple remedies, and he now administered whisky and a heart stimulant.

The effect was immediate and gratifying.

In a few minutes they had the satisfaction of seeing Wandell open his eyes.

His first inquiry was for his sister.

We pass over the talk which followed.

Wandell was terribly affected when he heard what had happened.

It seemed to have the effect of bracing him up, however.

He surprised the Bradys by getting on his feet, and when the old detective looked him over he was able to announce that beyond bruises he was not seriously hurt.

"It's that Badman Bill!" cried Wandell. "It is the hermit sure. The way you describe him tallies exactly with what Kit Burns told me."

His agony over his sister's fate was dreadful.

It took time to quiet him, but in the end he showed himself a man, and grew calm.

"What are we to do, Mr. Brady?" he demanded. "Shall we try and climb up on the other side and hurry on to Hangtown for help?"

"I think that first of all we ought to make another attempt to find the trail of this lunatic," replied the old detective. "If there is such a thing to be had as an immediate rescue of your unfortunate sister that is what we want."

"If we don't find her I shall blow my brains out—that's all."

"Don't talk rubbish. Come on, if you are able to walk."

"It is all my fault. If I had only listened to your warning!"

"Too late to think of that now, young man. Come!"

They hurried on around the bend, Harry leading the way.

Old King Brady's eyes were everywhere.

"They crossed here!" he suddenly exclaimed.

They had reached a point where a series of stones lay directly across the stream.

"It could be done," said Harry, "but how do you tell?"

"There lies Miss Wandell's hat in the water. Don't you see it right alongside that stone?"

"By jove, yes! I must have been blind not to have seen it before."

"Did you get as far as this last trip?"

"Not quite."

"Then that accounts for it. The hat fell from her head and lodged there against the stone."

"That's what! Come on!" cried Wandell.

He crossed the river so rapidly that it was hard to believe that but a few moments before he had been lying unconscious.

The Bradys followed.

Here there was a stretch of sand instead of stones.

The imprints of a man's feet were plainly visible.

"This way! We've got the trail!" cried the old detective.

He hurried on ahead, and after covering a hundred yards, suddenly paused.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed.

Here there was an opening in the bank, like the mouth of a cave.

The footprints turned toward it and ended there."

"He went in there sure!" cried Arthur, making a dash for the opening.

"Patience! Take it easy!" said Old King Brady, catching hold of the excited assayer and pulling him back.

"Let me go! I will!" cried Arthur, struggling.

"Calm yourself, my boy," said the old detective. "There is nothing to be gained by this kind of business. If the hermit is in there and shoots you, think of your poor sister's feelings when we come to rescue her later on."

"But what shall we do?"

"Give him the call, Harry," said Old King Brady. "Then flash your lantern in."

Harry shouted and whistled.

There was not a sound heard in answer.

"He either didn't go there, or he's laying for us, Governor," he said.

"Fire a shot," replied Old King Brady. "Stand aside then, and see if he will attempt to return it."

Harry discharged his revolver into the mouth of the cave.

The detectives had no rifles. They had intended buying them at Hangtown.

But even the shot did not bring the mysterious man to the surface.

After a wait of a few minutes, during which it was all Wandell could do to retain his patience, Old King Brady produced a small electric dark-lantern and started into the cave.

Harry followed close behind them.

Wandell tried to push ahead, but Old King Brady ordered him to keep back.

"You want to pick up your strength first of all, boy," he said. "Take it easy! Take it easy! We are old hands at the bellows. Leave us to deal with this man."

They had to stoop, the roof of the cave was so low.

In a moment Old King Brady came to an ascent.

Here the roof was higher, and they could stand upright.

The cave extended on, continually ascending.

Nowhere had its width been more than thirty feet.

"This is the bed of an old stream," said Old King Brady, pausing and mopping his forehead. "No doubt it runs right through to the floor of the canyon. I am very much afraid, Mr. Wandell, that we are not going to find your sister here."

"We must find her somewhere then. I'll never stop if it takes me to the North Pole."

Wandell seemed little inclined to talk, and no wonder.

He had been terribly shaken up.

Harry noticed that he was limping badly.

"We are going to have that fellow on our hands, first thing we know," he thought.

They pushed on about three hundred yards further, and came to a point where they could see daylight ahead.

"Just as I supposed," said Old King Brady. "We pass out into the open here."

They scrambled on up the steep ascent, and came out on the side of a steep slope in the midst of a thick growth of trees.

Here the dry bed of a stream extended still further up.

Clearly it was this stream that in former times had cut its way through the cave.

"This is going to be a slow hunt, I'm afraid," said Old King Brady, stopping for breath.

"I go ahead even if you don't," remarked Wandell.

"Here's something!" cried Harry.

He hurried up the bed of the stream, and stopped before a tree.

Upon the trunk, pinned in place by a hunting knife, was a paper.

Harry pulled out the knife and read from the paper as follows:

"Warning! Advance no further. To search for me spells death. Be wise and sheer off. This is the advice of the Hermit of Hangtown!"

"Come, that's strong advice!" exclaimed Old King Brady. "Somebody seems to feel a whole lot of consideration for us. Let's see that paper, Harry."

Wandell looked over his shoulder as he examined it.

"What do you think of that, Mr. Brady," he asked.

"That's very fine writing for a Western badman, and a lunatic at that," replied Old King Brady. "What do think of it yourself?"

"I don't believe Bill ever wrote it."

"Can he write at all?"

"Don't ask me. I have often heard people talk about him. He was the toughest kind of a specimen. May I take the paper?"

"Certainly."

Wandell carefully examined the writing.

"Good heavens, I see it all now!" he cried. "I know who wrote this."

"Who?"

"Gus Fielding."

"And who may Gus Fielding be?"

"My former assistant at the Kicking Mule. He is one

of the worst characters in Hangtown. We bounced him long ago, and since then he has lived the life of a tough and a gambler. It is terrible! I would almost rather Bella had been captured by the hermit than to have fallen into his hands."

"Dangerous man, eh?"

"The very worst. Worse still, he has known Bella all his life. Once they considered themselves engaged to be married, but through me it was broken off."

"But whatever brought him to the front in this business?"

"I can't imagine. If our coming had been known it would be different. Who could tell that the bridge was to break down as it did? It must have been accident. It puzzles me."

"Come on!" said Old King Brady. "We will push ahead a little further, at all events, before we give it up."

"Don't you think it possible that this man Fielding may be one of a party who are hunting the Hermit of Hangtown on their own account?" he asked, as they went on up the bed of the stream.

"It might be so," replied Wandell. "He trains with a tough bunch, and now you come to speak of it I haven't seen them around Hangtown for the last two or three days."

"Is the prospector Kit Burns one of the same bunch?"

"He was and he wasn't. He used to play poker with them. Kit works at times, though, which is more than they ever do."

They followed the bed of the stream about a quarter of a mile up the mountain side.

Now suddenly they came out of the forest upon an immense stretch of granite rock.

It extended upward as far as the eye could reach, and right and left it was the same.

The ledge sloped toward the line of the stream from either side.

In times of rain all the water caught on the ledge was thus thrown into this depression.

Thus it was easy to see that a raging torrent would be formed in a very short time, which while it continued to run would be capable of sweeping everything before it.

"All trails end here, Mr. Wandell," said Old King Brady. "Any searching for your sister which is to follow must be done on a regularly organized plan. This impromptu search has failed!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRADYS TAKE A FRESH START.

It took all Old King Brady's powers of persuasion to make Arthur Wandell consent to accompany them to Hangtown.

The plan was to engage a guide, and with a tent, horses and provisions to start on the search without delay.

Thus properly equipped, there would be some hope of success, whereas, to have gone on as they were going would have made failure sure.

To this reasoning Wandell at length yielded.

They accordingly returned down the mountain, and having with some difficulty located the Hangtown trail, they pushed on toward that town.

It was the wisest possible move.

Wandell's strength had been given him by excitement alone, and it soon began to fail.

Before they had gone ten miles he gave out altogether, and the Bradys would have found themselves in serious trouble if an empty wagon bound for Cokeville had not come along.

The wagon belonged to the Kicking Mule mine, and the driver knew Wandell, of course.

When he learned that the bridge was down he made no objection to turning back, and our travelers were carried into Hangtown.

Here Wandell was made comfortable at the hotel, and the only doctor in the place called to attend him.

The discovery of two broken ribs was the result. By noon the poor fellow was delirious with fever, raving about his sister and her danger.

The Bradys congratulated themselves upon getting him off their hands when they did.

But the detectives had not the faintest idea of relinquishing the search for Bella.

They went at once to the office of the Wells Fargo Co., and introduced themselves to Mr. Muldoon, telling him what had occurred.

They found him anything but a satisfactory person to deal with.

"Of course, gentlemen, I'll help you all I can," he said.

"I have my orders to that effect, and I shall do my best to carry them out; but I have no belief that you will be able to accomplish anything. Badman Bill is dead—that's sure. Who this hermit is nobody knows, but he isn't Bill, and the story of this Kit Burns is all moonshine."

"All you say may be true, Mr. Muldoon," replied Old King Brady, "but we are here for a definite purpose, and we mean to carry it out."

"Sure! I'm not hindering you," retorted the agent.

"You needn't go back to Frisco and report anything of that sort after you have failed."

"Where is this Burns? Is he in town now?" demanded Old King Brady.

"No, he isn't. He is a worthless fellow, here to-day and up in the mountains to-morrow."

"Do you know Gus Fielding?"

"Sure. What's he got to do with the business?"

"I am told that he knows the mountains. I'd like to get him for a guide."

"He don't know any more about them than I do, and

that's nothing at all. But if you want him I'll see if he can be found."

"We want horses more than anything else."

"There isn't one to be had in the town."

"But you have had three days to get them in since Mr. Montague telephoned you. Why didn't you send elsewhere?"

"Nowhere to send."

"Can you get us a tent?"

"I don't believe so. I don't know anybody who has one for sale."

"Good-day!" said Old King Brady, abruptly, and he started to leave the express office.

"Here! Hold on!" cried Muldoon. "Don't go off mad! I want to help you every way I can."

"We are here to work and not to listen to objections!" retorted Old King Brady, looking over his shoulder. "What you can't do we must—that is all!"

The Bradys started down the main street—the only business street of which Hangtown can boast.

"That fellow is clearly knocking us, Governor!" Harry remarked.

"That is what he is. I suspect it is even more than that."

"A plot to break us?"

"Exactly, and that Muldoon is in it. Half a million dollars is a lot of money, Harry. The story of this fellow Burns has no doubt started a hunt for the hermit, which very likely Burns himself is leading. At all events, I don't trust our agent, and we want to know just what he is about."

"What's to be done?"

"Go on up the road. When you come to that bit of woods slide out of sight, make a change and get down quick and shadow this Muldoon. Meanwhile I'll look for horses and such other things as we want."

"Right. Where will you go?"

"Directly to the Kicking Mule mine. For the sake of Bella Wandell, or rather for her brother's sake, I have no doubt I shall be able to get all I want there."

The Bradys separated at the post-office.

The old detective went inside and inquired for letters which he did not expect, while Harry pushed on up the hill.

The clothes worn by the Bradys are capable of all sorts of queer changes.

Harry climbed the hill and found himself in the wilderness all in a minute.

Going back in the woods, he quickly made his change.

When a few minutes later he came tramping back into Hangtown, it would have been difficult to recognize in him the well-dressed detective.

He passed the express office, and seeing that Mr. Muldoon was still at his desk, he crossed the street and entered Bausch's saloon.

This was the principal drinking place in Hangtown outside of the hotel.

There was nobody visible inside but a young German who was behind the bar.

Harry ordered soda-water and cigars, and started a conversation.

It was a warm day, and the door was open.

As he stood there he could look right into the express office across the way.

The German put the question which always comes in such cases before they had been talking five minutes.

"You was a stranger by Hangtown? Yes?"

"Yes; I just came in this morning," replied Harry. "I am looking for a job."

"Mining—huh?"

"Any old thing."

"I hear dey vant men up by de Kicking Mule."

"Good! If that's so then that's where I am going. Is it far?"

The German gave the direction, and then Harry ingeniously worked the conversation around to where he wanted it.

He had seen Old King Brady on the street. Did the German know the famous detective? He, himself, had seen him in Frisco several times.

The German didn't know Old King Brady, but he did know that he was in town, and he told why.

"Who is this hermit?" asked Harry.

"Oh, he was a stage ropper," replied the German. "He steal two million dollars vort of gold five years ago. Dey tink he was dead, but now dey find owit dot he was alive und was grazzy. He lifs by de mountains mit his gold."

"So? I should think some of you fellows would go after him instead of letting these detectives scoop in such a big pot. They'll swipe it themselves, of course."

The German looked wise.

"Mebbe somepody do go," he said.

"Ah! Some party has gone out, then?"

"I said mebbe. I dunno."

Harry pressed the fellow further, but could get no definite information.

While they were thus talking he saw a rough-looking fellow go into the express office.

He conversed a few minutes with Mr. Muldoon, and then they came out together.

Muldoon locked up the place, and with his visitor crossed the street and came into the saloon.

He merely glanced at Young King Brady.

It was evident that he did not suspect.

Calling for whisky, he treated his companion, and they were soon in close conversation at the other end of the bar.

Harry, changing the subject, kept on talking with the German.

But Young King Brady had been trained to talk and listen at the same time, and his ears are the sharpest of the sharp.

Of course, he was only able to catch fragments of what was being said.

Among other things the following reached his ears:

"This girl business is a piece of folly."

"Chances are everything will be spoiled unless we can get rid of——"

The names he did not catch.

That the "Bradys" completed the sentence he had not a doubt.

"Something must be done."

"You were a fool to try and balk them."

"Yes, the boys are on to them."

"No; nothing definite has been discovered yet."

These were the most important remarks heard.

There could be no doubt that Muldoon was concerned with a gang who were hunting the hermit in the mountains.

Soon after the two left the saloon, and the last thing Harry heard the agent say was:

"I'll look them up and let 'em have the horses. I reckon you are right. That's the best way."

Young King Brady had done his part.

He got out himself with as little delay as possible.

Telling the German that he intended to go to the Kicking Mule mine and apply for a job, he started in that direction.

He had not yet reached the mine, which was situated three miles from Hangtown, when he saw Old King Brady riding toward him, accompanied by three men, one of whom led a spare horse.

Harry jumped to the middle of the road, and threw up his hand, making a secret sign, one of the regular code of such signs which the Bradys employ.

This was simply to disclose his identity.

In a few moments the party came up and halted.

"This is my partner, gentlemen," said the old detective, adding:

"Harry, let me introduce Jack Nugent, Tom Welch, and Bill Taylor. They are going with us into the range. Get into the saddle. We won't waste a moment."

Besides their riders, the horses carried a store of provisions and a couple of tents.

Old King Brady had evidently been fairly successful in his efforts.

Harry sprang into the saddle, and pulled up alongside of his chief.

"You got what you wanted, it seems," he remarked.

"Yes. Mr. Baxter, the superintendent of the Kicking Mule, didn't hesitate an instant when he heard about Wandell and his sister. He let me have these men and the horses. He himself will follow with a larger party tomorrow. It was impossible for him to get away to-day."

"Do these men know the range?"

"Well, they don't. There was no man at the mine who does, so Baxter says. These mountains seem to have been very imperfectly explored."

"We shall have to do our own exploring, then?"

"That's about the size of it. How did you make out?" Harry told what he had overheard.

"Just as I supposed," said Old King Brady. "We don't want to pay the least attention to that fellow Muldoon. His finish is in sight. I shall surely report his case to Mr. Montague."

As they neared Hangtown the party put spurs to their horses and went dashing past the express office.

Muldoon came running out as they passed.

He shouted to Old King Brady, but not the least attention was paid to him, and the little party went dashing out of town on the Cokeville trail.

CHAPTER V.

DYNAMITING IN THE WOODS.

The Bradys had now taken a fresh start, and were rapidly leaving Hangtown behind them.

It might have been worse, but then it might have been better.

The three men were just common, everyday miners, and all recent comers at the Kicking Mule.

Thus the detectives, going into a wilderness, practically unexplored, would be obliged to find their way as best they could.

With no trail to guide them this might mean days of search, only to meet with failure in the end.

Old King Brady had picked out Tom Welch as the most intelligent of his party, and he resolved to make him the leader of the trio if it became necessary to divide up at any time.

They rode on to the broken bridge, and after a brief halt there turned aside and followed the rough trail up the mountain until they reached the big ledge.

"And now, boys," said the old detective, "this is as far as we got this morning. Night will soon overtake us, and we want to look sharp for a place to camp. I propose to strike directly across this ledge, following the basin. We will camp at the timber line when we strike it. Nothing can be done up here at night."

"I don't see no timber line in that direction, boss," said Welch. "I'm afraid it is going to carry us into the night."

"Which can't be helped. If the run proves too long we will camp on the ledge. Meanwhile, let it be full speed."

They put spurs to their horses, and went up over the rock.

It was slippery work.

Again and again the horses stumbled.

They soon had to slacken speed.

Darkness began to settle down upon them, but they had now caught sight of the timber line.

It was night when they reached it.

Here, as in many other parts of Washington, the red-wood trees were immense.

There was no underbrush. They could look into the gloomy grove as far as the fading light would permit.

"This ends our day's run," said Old King Brady. "Make camp, boys, and make yourselves as comfortable as possible. The chances are there will be nothing more doing to-night."

The horses were hobbled, and the two tents set up directly on the ledge.

Welch started in to cook supper, and produced a better meal than Old King Brady had dared to hope for.

Everything necessary had been provided by Superintendent Baxter, even to rifles.

The Bradys were now as well equipped as if Mr. Montague's orders had been carried out.

After supper, while indulging in a smoke, the detectives walked a short distance into the woods, discussing the case as they strolled on.

It was then that Harry suddenly discovered a light at some distance ahead of them, shining faintly among the trees.

"You see that?" he cried, calling his partner's attention to it.

"Neighbors, eh?" exclaimed Old King Brady. "Well, well! This must be looked into."

"You were a little too previous in saying that there would be nothing further doing to-night, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps. It's not necessary to disturb our men, however. You and I are good to find out the meaning of that light."

Harry started ahead.

"We'll keep together," said Old King Brady. "Slow down a bit. I can't walk so fast."

They pushed on among the trees, covering a greater distance than they had anticipated would be necessary.

It seemed as if they never would come to the light.

"Shall we ever find our way back?" suggested Harry.

"We surely can. I've got my compass, and I took our bearings while you were busting ahead," was the reply.

"Take it easy. We shall soon be there now."

Before they had gone many yards further they were able to make out a hut built in between two huge trees.

It was the rudest kind of a structure.

In one of the two windows the light burned.

The door was closed, and nothing was to be seen of barn or other outbuildings.

"Can it be the hermit's hold-out?" questioned Harry.

"We know nothing, and consequently want to go very slow," was the reply. "You know our tactics in such a case well enough."

They stole cautiously forward.

"Hold on!" breathed Harry, suddenly seizing his partner's arm and pulling him behind one of the big tree trunks.

The door of the hut had opened, and two men came out.

It was not easy to distinguish what sort of persons they were in the uncertain light.

Both went around to the side of the hut, where one dropped on the ground.

He crawled in underneath the hut, which was raised about two feet to give air space.

The other squatted down and passed something to him.

"What in the world are those fellows about?" breathed Young King Brady.

"Unless they are trying to blow up the hut you have got me," the old detective replied. "I'll be blest if I know."

"Confound them! I believe that is just what they are trying to do."

"Don't raise your voice too high, Harry. We had better not talk, in fact."

The man outside now straightened up.

After a minute's delay the one under the hut was seen to strike a match.

"That's their game!" whispered Old King Brady. "I guess we had better jump on them; but wait a second. They may take themselves off."

And this was just what happened.

Instantly the man crawled out and both hurried off among the trees.

"Now!" breathed Old King Brady.

They crept forward, gaining the hut in a minute.

The two men had vanished in the darkness.

Beneath the hut was a sputtering fuse getting in its fine work.

"Shall I try to put it out?" demanded Harry.

"No, no! We will take our chances," replied the old detective. "There isn't a second to waste!"

He flung open the door of the hut.

Inside, lying asleep in the lower of three bunks built against the wall, was a young man, undressed.

His clothes were flung over a chair, and beside the bunk upon a stool was an opium layout, which told the story.

"Go for him, Harry!" cried Old King Brady.

They rushed in.

The old detective seized the fellow's clothes, and flung them out of doors.

Meanwhile Harry got the sleeper by the shoulders and dragged him out.

Old King Brady stooped, caught him by the legs, and out into the open they went.

The young man did not rouse up.

"Run! Run!" cried the old detective.

They ran him back among the trees, and at a safe distance dropped him on the ground.

Even the "dull thud" with which he dropped failed to arouse him, but what followed did.

Instantly there was a loud explosion, following a flash of light.

The hut went up in the air, and fell in fragments.

"Hey, say! What's the row, Gus?" cried the dope fiend, sitting up.

And he was a very much surprise dope fiend when he

found himself sitting there with nothing on but his undershirt, and two strangers looking down upon him.

"You have been hitting the pipe, young man," said Old King Brady, shaking his finger at him, "you know you have!"

The young man scrambled to his feet.

He looked toward the vanished hut; he looked at the Bradys.

"Is this a pipe dream or what?" he gasped.

"No pipe dream," replied the old detective. "Whoever you are, two fellows have been trying to blow you into the next world, and they would have done it, too, if we hadn't happened to come along just in time to carry you out."

"The hut—blown up? Gee!"

"You see."

"And—and who are you?"

"Show your hand first, young fellow."

"Well, I'm Kit Burns, I reckon! Everybody around Hangtown knows me; but you two don't belong there."

"We don't. Who were the two with you when you went to sleep?"

"Hold on! I don't know as I'm ready to tell just yet. I know you now. You are the Brady detectives!"

"Right, Mr. Burns! Suppose we had left you in that hut?"

"Say, old man, I don't know whether you are giving it to me straight or not. You may have blown up my house for all I know."

"Don't be foolish. We were walking this way, and we saw two men come out. One was tall and slim, and the other shorter. The short one crawled under the hut, and the other passed something down to him. He struck a match, lit a fuse, crawled out, and then both ran away."

"Well, they had the goods to do the job with, all right, blame them! I guess you are telling the truth."

"You can bank on it."

"Never mind! I'll get square. Blame it all, I wish you had saved my clothes! I can't go after them in my shirt tail, that's one thing sure."

"I made an attempt to save your clothes, at the risk of my own life. I threw them out. Perhaps they are where they dropped now."

They went back to the ruins.

There was scarcely a vestige left of the hut, but the clothes were undisturbed.

Kit Burns seized his shirt with a sigh of relief, and lost no time in getting into it.

He did not speak another word until he had finished dressing.

That he was still half dazed with opium was easy to see.

"You are out hunting for the Hermit of Hangtown," he said, after he had secured the last button and clapped on his hat.

"That's it," replied Old King Brady. "What about that?"

"Blamed if I know. You are working for the Wells Fargo people?"

"Yes."

"Will they—will they pay some kind of reward or something in case you succeed?"

"I daresay they will. Are you thinking of coming over on our side, Kit?"

"Blamed if I don't think I better. I have got to get square with the gang somehow."

"Meaning Gus Fielding's gang, Muldoon's gang, and all the rest."

"You're a slick card."

"Well?"

"To catch on to names so quick, I mean."

"That's our business. Was Gus Fielding one of the two who tried to blow you up?"

"He was!"

"The tall or the short one?"

"He was the tall one."

"What about Arthur Wandell's sister?"

"Say, that's what we quarreled over. I say it's a blame shame that he should have tried to kill that girl, and that's what he did."

"She still lives?"

"Yes."

"Did he saw the supports of the bridge?"

"Yes. He meant to do you and Arthur. He didn't know the gal was to be along, at least so he said, but I wouldn't believe him under oath. Is Arthur dead?"

"He has two ribs broken, and is delirious with fever."

"It's a shame. He's a good man. I hain't got nothing against him."

"Did Gus Fielding dress up to look like the hermit?"

"Yes, he did. He was laying for you fellers, but you got out of the wagon. He might have given warning when he seen the gal was in the wagon; that's what I said to his face, and he was afraid I'd go back on him. That's why he tried to blow me up, I suppose."

"And where's the girl now?"

"Don't know."

"Well, are you coming over on our side?"

"Yes, I guess so," replied Burns.

"All right. Follow us, then, if you have nothing to get here."

"Everything is gone. I haven't a blame thing left."

"Come, then," said Old King Brady, and he started back toward the camp.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BRADYS SEE THE HERMIT.

It is hardly necessary to say that the Bradys were very glad to have fallen in with Kit Burns.

That he should thus find himself under obligations to them was better still.

"Are you a regular opium smoker, Burns?" asked Old King Brady, as they walked along.

"You bet I'm not!" was the reply. "That layout you saw in the hut belonged to Gus Fielding. This is the first time I ever hit the pipe in my life."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"And why?"

"Because you seem to be a fine healthy young fellow. It would be a shame to wreck your life by becoming addicted to that horrible drug."

"Boss, I'll tell you something; what's more, I'll swear it, and I always keep my word. Never again for mine. Gus Fielding persuaded me. Now I know why."

"And so do I."

"Well?"

"You had told him all you knew about the hermit; he had no further use for you, and meant to put you out of the way."

"You haven't quite hit it. I refused to tell them, but after I hit the pipe I did tell them."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"I reckon it does."

"How many in this gang, Kit?"

"Only the three,"

"Muldoon, Gus Fielding, and his partner, you mean?"

"Yes. And me. I supposed I was number one. I see now they meant to make me number nought."

"Exactly. What's the other fellow's name?"

"Joe Dillard."

"Belongs in Hangtown?"

"Yes."

Harry thought of the man who had talked with Muldoon in the saloon, and wondered where he came in, but he concluded not to interfere.

Harry was worrying about another matter.

They had now gone a considerable distance, and yet they had not come to the camp.

He was just about to speak of that when Old King Brady pulled out his lantern and consulted the compass.

"Upon my word, Harry, I believe we are going wrong!"

"Where are you heading for? I have been wondering?" asked Kit.

"For the ledge where we left our companions."

"Hello! There are others with you, then?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Three miners from the Kicking Mule—Jack Nugent, Tom Welch, and Bill Taylor are their names."

"Don't know them. They must be newcomers."

"I suspect they are. One of them told me they were from Montana."

"Exactly. Likely they are part of a bunch who came to town a couple of weeks ago; but you are going wrong if you want to make the ledge."

"I begin to suspect it. I was heading southwest."

"The ledge is due west."

They changed their course, and hurried on.

Kit Burns now dropped into silence.

Harry thought he did not seem to relish the idea of meeting the miners.

At last they saw the moon shining ahead of them, and they suddenly came out on the ledge.

But there was no sign of the camp here.

"Let's see, which way do we want to go to overcome my blunder?" said Old King Brady.

Kit pointed out the direction, and they pressed forward.

"There are the tents!" exclaimed Harry, after a few moments.

"I see only one," said Old King Brady, "and I don't see the horses. What can this mean?"

They were soon to know.

Reaching the tent they found that men and horses had both vanished.

In the tent were the Bradys' blankets and a few provisions.

"They have gone back on us! They have deserted!" Harry exclaimed.

"You might have known it," said Kit. "You can't depend upon such a bunch."

Pinned to one of the blankets was a scrap of paper, across which were scrawled the following words:

"Boss: We have gone prospecting on our own account. We would have left you the two horses, only we didn't care to get chased, and had to put you back somehow. Anyhow, we have left you the tent, so you can be comfortable. Hope you win out, but we hain't wasting our time on no hermit-hunting. We are out for gold, and this chance was too good to be overlooked."

"The rascals!" cried Old King Brady. "Now you see, Burns, what we have sacrificed by stopping to help you."

"Well, for my part, I'm glad they have gone," replied Kit. "We can attend to this business, boss. I'm going to tell you something now."

"Before you tell it let us definitely understand each other," said Old King Brady. "Are you with us through thick and thin?"

"I am; I swear it. I'm a square man, Mr. Brady. What I promise I carry out."

"Good! Now let us hear what you have to say."

"Well, it's like this. I didn't give it to Gus Fielding straight. I never told no one where I seen the hermit, but I am going to take you there to-morrow."

"Good!"

"Yes. I suspected them fellers from the first."

"You are a shrewd one, all right."

"Have to be. Now, I'll tell you about the hermit."

"One moment. Do you believe he is this Badman Bill?"

"I do. The robbery happened before my time in Hangtown, but Muldoon has a picture of Bill what was taken

some time before he robbed the stage. The face tallies in a way with the man I seen."

"Go on."

"Well, it's this way. I was up by the big lake—it hain't got no name that ever I heard of. It's down at the bottom of a sink a thousand feet deep, and there hain't no way of getting down there. That's the time I first seen the hermit."

"I see. Go on."

"He came out of the woods and was on to me sudden-like. He was bareheaded, and the few clothes he had on were all rags. He was a big, powerful fellow, and I tell you I was scared."

"As well you might be. What did you do?"

"Well, I put up my rifle and was going to fire when he threw up his hands.

"'Don't shoot!' he says. 'You see I'm unarmed. I don't want to hurt you, and don't you hurt me.'"

"And your answer?"

"Oh, I told him I didn't want to hurt him. I says, 'who are you, anyhow?'"

"'I am the hermit of Hangtown,' he says, 'but I'm tired of being a hermit. I want some nice young fellow to keep me company, and I think you'll fill the bill. Will you come along to my holdout and live with me?'"

"Rather a startling proposal."

"Well, I should say so. 'What should I do that for?' I says. 'I don't know you from a crow. I'm only a prospector knocking about among these mountains. I'd sooner go it alone.'"

"And how did he take that?"

"Well, sir, he pulled out a handful of nuggets from each pocket and showed 'em to me. No, it was nuggets in one hand and dust in the other, come to think. 'I'll give you all this and a lot more of the same kind if you will come and live with me, boy,' he says. 'I've got millions in this sort of stuff where I live,' he says. 'Come on. You won't regret it. It's far and away better than any mine you'll ever strike.'"

"I don't suppose you were tempted."

"Tempted! Man, I was scared to death, he looked so wild. 'You'll have to excuse me,' I says. 'I'm in a hurry. I couldn't think of taking up with your offer nohow.'"

"And what did he do then?"

"Do! Why, he just let one yell and made a rush for me. You better believe I ran for my life. I thought he was right behind me all the time, but when at last I was winded and stopped to look around he wasn't nowhere to be seen. That was the first time I seen him. I didn't say nothing about it then, for I never guessed who he was till one night I was in the express office and heard Muldoon and some others talking about this Badman Bill and the stage robbery. Then, like a blame fool, I blurted it all out."

"And that was the first time. How about the second?"

"Well, that was about three weeks ago. I was up near the same place trying to blast out a few bits of ore from

a vein I had discovered. He came upon me sudden-like, and before I knowed it, there he was, and this time he had a rifle.

"You blame fool, you wouldn't do what I asked you, and now you shall die!" he hollered, and before I knowed it he fired. Well, he missed his aim, and I dusted. That was all there was to that."

"Didn't he fire again?"

"No, he didn't, and that was the strange part of it. I dodged in behind a tree where I had left my own rifle. I'd have plugged him then, but when I looked out I couldn't see nothing of him. I haven't the least idea where he went to, and that was the strange part of it. Sometimes I think he hain't a human being nohow, and that's a fact."

And such was Kit Burns' interesting narration.

Old King Brady questioned him further, and more particularly about Bella.

Kit assured the old detective that he had not the least idea where Fielding and his companion had hidden the girl.

All he knew was that Fielding boasted of having captured her.

Burns, it seemed, had taken possession of the hut, which had been built by some prospector, and the two men came to him there the night before, and again on this night.

This substantially was all he had to tell.

It was after midnight when the conversation ended.

Burns and Harry then turned in and slept, but Old King Brady watched until morning.

There was no alarm, and at sunrise all were stirring, and breakfast was cooked.

As the thieves had carried off the Bradys' rifles, and Kit had lost his by the explosion of the hut, the party were ill prepared for the work before them.

But in spite of this Old King Brady was resolved to proceed.

Kit had promised to take them up to the nameless lake, and the Bradys had resolved to go there.

In spite of his assertion that he had not told Fielding the point where he had seen the hermit, Old King Brady was inclined to believe that he had actually done so, and that he was just as likely to run into the pair there as anywhere else.

So, after breakfast the few things which the thieves had left them were gathered up, and the march up the mountain was begun.

It was a hard and toilsome climb.

Most of the way it was through a forest of immense trees.

Passing out of this they came upon barren ledges over which they toiled for an hour.

At last they came out upon the edge of the great sink, and looking down saw the nameless lake far below them.

It was a beautiful sheet of water of several square miles in extent.

On all sides it was surrounded by towering cliffs, and it

was easy to see that they were looking down into the crater of some extinct volcano.

"There!" cried Kit Burns, throwing down his pack. "It was right here by this redwood tree that I was standing when I first see the hermit. He seemed to come right up out of the hole—blame me if he didn't. It was right over there where he stood."

Old King Brady walked to the place and looked down.

There was a narrow ledge about five feet below.

It was quite broad enough for a man to stand upon, but below it there was a perpendicular descent to the lake.

It was while he was thus studying the situation that a shout from Harry attracted his attention.

"Look! Look!" yelled Kit, pointing to a place where the rocks projected well out into the crater about five hundred yards away.

At the very end of this ledge stood a man.

He was bare-headed, wore long boots, shirt and trousers.

He seemed to be staring at the Bradys and their companion.

All at once he threw up his hands, and, uttering a wild yell, jumped from the rocks and vanished like a flash.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NIGHT ALARM AT THE LAKE.

"By thunder, that's no man!" cried Kit Burns. "I said so first off; but them fellers talked me out of it. I know it now."

Old King Brady said nothing in reply.

He knew the prospector's kind well, and did not need to be told how useless it was to argue with Kit.

And certainly there was something uncanny in the way the hermit had vanished.

It was a matter to be investigated, at all events.

"There's one good thing in not having the horses," remarked Harry. "We are not tied down as we otherwise would be. Let's get right over there, Governor, and see what we can find."

"It's a longer walk than it looks," said Kit. "There's a big break between here and there. It is nearly a mile around."

"We will go at all events," replied Old King Brady. "I am anxious to cultivate the acquaintance of this remarkable gentleman, who seems to be provided with wings."

"Wouldn't you think so?" cried Kit. "Well, I dunno. I hain't got no education to amount to nothing. Perhaps you fellers can explain how a man can jump out like that and not get killed, but I'll be blamed if I can."

"Explanations come later," replied the old detective. "How near is that point to the last place you saw the hermit?"

"It's the very spot."

"Good! Then he can't do the vanishing act every-

where, it seems. What do you think of the chances of Gus Fielding and Joe Dillard coming up here?"

"Wouldn't be surprised to see 'em any time."

"Ha! I thought as much. Now, be honest, Kit. Didn't you tell them where you saw the hermit?"

"Well, I told 'em it was up around here."

"Of course you did. And the reason you didn't name the actual spot was because you couldn't have made them understand it if you had tried. Isn't that so?"

"Well, I s'pose it is."

"Exactly. Now we understand each other. Well, you have made good with us, at all events. Now let us get around there and see what we can discover."

The "break" referred to by Kit Burns proved to be a deep rift in the rock, about twenty feet in width.

This seemed to be the outcome of some ancient earthquake.

It extended back a long distance, and reached down to the level of the lake.

Peering down, Old King Brady saw that there was a stream leaving the lake flowing into this rift.

What finally became of it he was unable to determine, but he felt little doubt that like many of these western streams it lost itself underground.

They passed around the head of the break, coming at last out upon the point of rocks where the hermit had disappeared.

And here they certainly had to face a puzzler.

For a hundred feet down on either side there was a sheer descent.

But on the side where the hermit had vanished below the perpendicular precipice which extended for this distance the ledge was much broken, and ran on a long slope down to the level of the lake.

That it would be entirely possible for an active man to master this descent once he could get down to it was easy to be seen.

"Has anyone ever been down to that lake, Kit?" Old King Brady asked.

"Well," replied Kit, "I never got down there, and if you ask me what I believe I tell you that I don't think anyone else ever did; same time, I'm bound to admit that Gus Fielding claims to have been fishing in that lake. I think he lies. Mr. Muldoon believes him. Their idea is that the hermit has his holdout down here."

"Exactly. Don't be offended with me for saying it, but it seems to me that they know more about the country around here than you do."

"Well, they'd orter. I hain't been around here more'n a few months. I told you that."

"Is this the place where Badman Bill is supposed to have committed suicide?"

"Somewhere's here, yes."

"Harry, we must investigate," said Old King Brady. "Thank goodness those thieves left us one of our ropes. Will you go down over that cliff?"

"Sure," replied Young King Brady.

"Oh, say, come now; you can't do that!" cried Kit.

"What's the reason we can't," replied Old King Brady.

"We can do lots of things that you can't, my friend."

The rope was produced, and made fast under Harry's arms.

And now Kit Burns had an exhibition of the wonderful strength of the old detective.

Often Harry had been placed in similar situations.

He is a lightweight, and he knew that Old King Brady was perfectly equal to the task.

Lowering himself over the edge of the cliff, he prepared to drop.

"Shall I catch hold, Mr. Brady?" demanded Kit.

"No," was the reply. "Don't touch the rope until I am ready to haul him up. You can lend me a hand then if you will."

Then Harry let go, and Old King Brady slowly let him down over the cliff.

In a minute the rope was shaken.

"Now!" cried the old detective.

Kit made a grab for the rope, and in a minute Harry's head appeared over the edge of the cliff.

"Mystery explained!" he called out, as he pulled himself up.

"I thought so," said Old King Brady. "Well?"

"It's a case of a cave and a sliding platform."

"Exactly. We have struck similar things before. How far down?"

"About fifteen feet."

"Did you try to pull the platform out?"

"I got hold of it, but I couldn't budge the thing. I'd like to try again, though."

"Can you get into the cave?"

"Sure. The entrance is only about four feet high. It is in a little from the ledge. That is why you can't see it. I can get in there easy, though."

"And once in you will find a way to push out the platform. That's our scheme."

"It beats the band!" cried Kit. "It begins to look as if we might succeed."

"We must succeed," said Harry. "We have a reputation to sustain. The saying is the Bradys never fail."

"I should never have thought of trying that scheme."

"Well, you are not a detective," said Old King Brady. "I am ready whenever you are, Harry."

"Oh, I'm ready now, for that matter; but it is rather hard on you, Governor. If there was only a tree around which you could warp the rope."

"But there isn't. I'll let Kit help me this time."

So Harry went down over the cliff again.

It was a ticklish job crawling into the narrow opening. Once in Harry found that he had penetrated a small cave which extended back but a short distance under the rocks.

But at its end was an opening leading downward by a path not so very steep.

Right at the beginning of the descent Harry made a discovery.

Scattered about the floor of the cave were a number of golden nuggets.

The platform consisted of three logs tied together with rope.

There was an iron staple and ring fixed to the end, and to this was attached another rope.

The logs had been smoothed off underneath, and Harry found no difficulty in pushing them out a few feet.

Their length prevented them from falling, but to enable them to bear a man's weight an iron brace covered the central log.

The log ran through this brace, the ends of which were embedded in the rock.

Harry went out on this platform, and called up to his companions.

"You can come down," he cried, "but I wouldn't undertake to jump it the way the hermit did."

"I guess not," replied Old King Brady. "I'll be on the safe side and drop."

In a minute they had joined Harry in the cave,

"Ingenious arrangement," remarked the old detective, looking the contrivance over. "He must have come up from below to build it, however. It never could have been built from above."

"I've made another discovery," said Harry, and he pointed to the opening at the back and to the nuggets.

"A golden trail!" exclaimed Old King Brady.

Kit made a dive for the nuggets.

"That's right! Pick them up and keep them if you choose," said the old detective. "The putting of them here is the work of a lunatic. We now know beyond a doubt what sort of man we have to deal with. Come, Harry, let's be on the move."

Old King Brady had dropped their packs down upon the platform before descending himself.

The platform was now pulled in, and the packs shouldered.

The descent was then begun.

The way was rough, but the Bradys have often covered more difficult ground.

But the singular part of it was that this indeed proved to be a golden trail.

Every ten feet or so they came upon a little collection of golden nuggets.

These were not scattered about promiscuously, but in each place were deposited in a little pile upon the rock.

Scrambling down for a distance of about two hundred feet, the detectives saw light ahead, and now came out through a narrow opening upon the side of the crater.

Here there was a well-defined trail leading down to the lake.

As in the cave, the descent was marked by little piles of nuggets.

Kit filled his trousers pockets, securing several hundred dollars' worth.

At last they came down to the water's edge.

"Come, that was easy done!" exclaimed Old King Brady.

"But now what?"

"Perhaps the golden trail don't end here," said Harry.

"Let us look about."

But the golden trail did end right there.

They saw no more of the stuff, although they looked for it in both directions.

There was a broad beach extending down to the water's edge.

It was strewn with water-washed stone, black in every instance, and seemingly composed of old lava.

Of course, these revealed no foot-prints, and it was Hobson's choice which way they went.

They chose the left, and followed the lake over a mile without coming to anything of interest.

"We had better pitch our tent and wait for developments," decided Old King Brady. "This is dinner time, and I don't care who knows we are here."

So the tent was put up, and a fire started.

Harry cooked ham and made coffee, feeling thankful that the thieves had left them anything to eat.

But the remainder of the day passed without any further discovery.

The Bradys wandered around the lake in both directions, but they found no trace of a human being.

"We shall fare better after dark," declared the old detective. "I don't doubt for a moment that the hermit has seen us. It is up to him now to make the next move."

But Mr. Hermit was not moving, it seemed.

Night settled down over the crater, and there was nothing doing.

The Bradys lighted no fire after dark, but they kept a sharp lookout for a light elsewhere up to ten o'clock.

None was seen; however, and at that time Old King Brady rolled himself up in his blankets and went to sleep.

Kit undertook to watch with Harry, but he soon gave it up, and stretching himself upon a flat rock with his coat doubled up under his head for a pillow, went fast asleep in a moment.

And so Young King Brady was left to stand watch alone, under circumstances which required him to be ever on the alert.

It was the gloomiest watch he had ever undertaken. The night had turned off cloudy, and not a star shone. The high walls of the crater seemed to increase the darkness.

Harry, pacing up and down before the tent, grew decidedly nervous.

An hour passed.

It seemed like two.

Again and again he had flashed his little electric dark lantern upon his watch to see how the time was going.

At one he was to wake up Old King Brady, but it was only eleven when suddenly he was startled by an unexpected sound.

Someone was swimming toward the camp.

He could hear the regular strokes in the water, and at no great distance away.

Young King Brady drew his revolver and waited for what was to come.

CHAPTER VIII.

UP AGAINST THE HERMIT.

The sounds out on the lake ceased as suddenly as they had begun.

From the moment Young King Brady drew his revolver he heard nothing.

He waited some time, his eyes endeavoring to pierce the darkness.

He did not like to flash his dark lantern, but after a little he did so.

The light did not penetrate very far, however, and he was not able to distinguish anything.

"It must have been some fish, I suppose," thought Harry, "but I don't see what there could have been out there short of a sturgeon which would make a noise like that."

He had been on the point of waking the old detective, but he now gave this idea up and resumed his walk along the beach.

Suddenly he heard the sound again at a little distance ahead of him.

Harry hurried to the spot, and once more flashed his dark lantern.

It was just about the most imprudent thing he could have done, as the event proved.

Suddenly there was a whizzing sound, and a lariat dropped over Young King Brady's head.

He had just caught sight of a naked man standing in the water, as it seemed.

Then the noose tightened about his neck, and down he went.

"Governor! Governor!" he shouted.

This was the last.

Harry was drawn into the water by a strength which he was powerless to overcome.

He managed to get his head out in a few seconds, however.

On he went.

Somebody was towing him.

Harry fumbled for his knife, got it, and was just about to cut the lariat when a naked man suddenly rose beside him and struck him a stinging blow on the hand.

The knife dropped into the water.

"Don't you fight this thing or I'll knock you six ways for Sunday!" a voice hissed in his ear.

"Harry! Harry! Where are you?" Old King Brady was heard calling from the beach.

Where he was then was up against a raft upon which stood the man who had thrown the lariat.

"Climb up!" hissed the other. "You're a dead one if you don't!"

A revolver was thrust in his face.

There was no time to parley.

Young King Brady climbed up on the raft.

The man in the water sprang up after him.

"You're our prisoner, young feller," he whispered. "Don't you try to show fight if you know when you are well off."

He was a tall, powerfully built man, as nearly as Harry could make out in the darkness.

His companion now started to work a big sweep, which was attached to the raft.

The oar was evidently muffled, for they moved forward noiselessly.

From the shore Old King Brady was still shouting, but Harry did not dare to make any reply.

The man who was handling the sweep evidently understood his business, for the raft advanced with considerable speed.

When they were well away from the shore the other, who had held Harry constantly covered, began to talk.

"You must be one of the Brady detectives?" he demanded.

"Well, I don't deny it."

"It wouldn't be any use. Which one are you?"

"Do I look like Old King Brady? I believe I am not over a hundred, but I suppose you can't see in the dark."

"Don't be a fool, Gus," growled the man at the oar. "Of course he is Young King Brady. Anybody might know that."

"So it is Mr. Gus Fielding I am up against," thought Harry. "What a fool I was not to watch out sharper. I deserve this."

"Who is that third fellow with you?" was then asked.

"A man we hired as a guide."

"Sure he isn't Kit Burns?"

"Who is Kit Burns?"

"What's his name?"

"Bill something. I didn't ask him his last name."

This seemed to satisfy.

The man dropped the subject.

"You fellows are out after Badman Bill?" was the next question.

"We are."

"How did you get down here?"

"Climbed down."

"I don't believe it. There is no way on that side of the sink."

"I can't help what you believe. I'm telling you what we did."

"They say the Bradys are slick articles," put in the fellow who worked the oar, and whom Harry correctly assumed to be Joe Dillard.

"Oh, I dunno," said Gus. "Everybody is slick when things go their way. Hurry up, Joe! We don't want to leave Bella alone so long."

"Pull yourself if you think you can do it any faster."

"I don't think that, but I do think I'd like to get on my clothes pretty well."

"Want to wait for it? I'll keep him covered if you do."

"See here, Fielding, put on your clothes," said Harry. "I give you my word not to make a move until you are dressed."

"That's kind of you. Oh, by jove, Joe, we're a pair of fools."

"What now?" cried Joe.

"Never searched him. He may have a dozen guns on him."

"As it happens," put in Harry, "he only has one, and here it is. I don't want any row, neither do I want to get into the water again, being quite wet enough."

Thus saying, Harry handed over his revolver.

It was not his only weapon.

He had another revolver in one of the many secret pockets he carried about his clothes.

But though Joe searched him now while Gus kept the revolver at his head, this was not found.

Gus got into his clothes after that.

Young King Brady made no effort to interfere.

He had found the water of this volcanic lake icy cold, and he had no desire to tackle it again.

"Do you know which way you are going, Gus?" he demanded, after a little.

"Do I know which way I'm going?" mimicked Gus; "of course I do. Seems to me you are getting pretty blame familiar."

"You'll stand for it."

"How do you know I will? How do you know my name, anyhow?"

"Pshaw! Give me credit for some sense, will you? When I chased you the time you carried off Bella Wandell didn't I know you were a man disguised? Didn't Arthur Wandell know who you were as soon as I told him what had happened?"

"What did you do with Arthur?" demanded Gus, curiously.

"We took him to Hangtown and left him there."

"Was he much hurt?"

"Three ribs broken. He was raving with fever when we came away."

"I hope he dies."

"Kind of you."

"It's a blame pity he wasn't killed, and you fellows, too."

"Still kinder! It must have taken you quite a while to saw away the supports of that bridge."

"Who says I did?"

"I imagine so."

"You are fresh, pard. Do you know what's coming to you?"

"All kinds of nice things if you have the distributing of the Christmas presents, I dare say."

"You bet. But now to business. There is only one way in which you can get out of this snap, Brady."

"Which is what?"

"We want a clear field here, and we mean to have it. We don't want no fellows working in the interest of the Wells Fargo Express, for we want Badman Bill, and we want his gold, and we mean to get it, too."

"Very fine, but you haven't told me how I am to escape."

"By writing a note to your partner for me to deliver which will bring him our way. We'll take care of him, and you can light out."

"That might be arranged. I'm not particularly stuck on the old snoozer. I'd like to go partners with a couple of young fellows like you well enough."

"Well, you can't. Now I'll tell you; Old King Brady was the means of sending a pal of mine to Folsom State's prison on a twenty-years' sentence. I swore to get square, and I mean to do it."

"Who was your pal?"

"Never you mind. I'm no hand to slop over. Will you do what I ask?"

"Sure, if you will let me go free."

"That's all right. I'll let you write a note in the morning, and one of us shall take it over."

"Settled. You needn't bother your head about me at all now. I'm only too glad of the chance to double on the old man, for as I said before, I'm sick and tired of his cranky ways."

"Do they believe it?" Harry asked himself.

He could not see how any man of sense could believe such talk on his part.

But Gus Fielding seemed to swallow it all.

He said no more to Harry after this, but confined his talk to Joe Dillard, who seemed to be half a fool.

Harry listened closely to every word which passed between them.

He was thus able to pick up a few points.

Among others that Muldoon had "staked" were this beautiful pair of scoundrels.

The agent's name was not mentioned in full, but their allusions to "Mul" were too plain to be misunderstood.

Meanwhile the raft was making as good progress as could be expected.

How Dillard was able to find his way in the darkness was a good deal of a mystery to Young King Brady.

But the fellow seemed to know just where he was going. That he didn't was soon proved.

"Say, Joe! We are coming ashore!" cried Gus, suddenly. "We can't be there yet."

"Must be! I've been steering all right."

"But it's so blame dark. I don't believe this is the place."

"Get ashore and see."

The raft had grounded in shallow water.

Gus produced an old-fashioned dark lantern, struck a match, and lit it.

As he dashed it about Harry saw towering cliffs ahead of them.

"Oh, bags! You've struck the wrong tack altogether," growled Gus. "So much for being cock-sure. I knew blame well you could never get back. Now we've got to wait for daylight, I suppose."

Joe began to excuse himself, and a heated discussion followed.

It looked for a minute as though it might come to a fight, but all in an instant the situation changed.

Gus was still flashing his lantern about when all of a sudden there came within the line of its light a strange figure standing up against the cliffs.

It was a tall man, with a great mop of hair.

He wore big boots, and his clothes were rags.

Instantly Harry recognized the hermit.

With lightning quickness, and before anyone could make a move or utter a sound, the fellow threw up a rifle and fired.

"Great guns! I'm a goner!" yelled Joe Dillard.

He threw up his hands, and went over backward into the water.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" yelled the hermit, and in the same breath he fired again.

Gus had dropped the lantern and seized his rifle, which lay on the raft.

He was too slow, however.

As the shot rang out he dropped the rifle, and without even a groan fell dead at Harry's feet.

Young King Brady waited for nothing.

Rushing to the edge of the raft, he dove into the lake.

A second later and he also might have met his fate, for once more the rifle cracked as the waters closed above his head.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESCUE OF BELLA WANDELL.

If Harry had been less than the expert swimmer he was he also might have met death at the hands of the hermit that night.

The wild creature ran to the water's edge, shouting: "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Harry kept under as long as he could, swimming for all he was worth.

When at last he rose to the surface all was still.

But still he swam on, unwilling to take chances.

Winded at last, he went ashore and crouched beneath the cliffs.

He was terribly shaken up by what had occurred.

Death had been very close to him, for it might just as well have been himself as either of his captors who received the bullets.

But this was not to be, it seemed, and once again Young

King Brady had lived to be able to tell of a marvelous escape.

But what to do was now the question.

Harry thought the situation over, and came to the conclusion that his best plan was to remain where he was until daylight.

And such another night of anxiety he never put in.

Every instant it seemed as if he could hear footsteps stealing toward him.

His hair seemed to rise; wet as he was, he still burst into perspiration again and again from very fear.

And who under the circumstances would not have done the same?

At a time like this the bravest man trembles.

The awful night ended at last, however, and when the sun rose there had been no alarm.

The day turned out hot, and the clouds of the night cleared away with the rising sun.

Harry looked across the lake.

He saw that instead of striking to the other shore Joe Dillard had steered his raft at an oblique angle.

The tent could be seen about a mile away.

A man was pacing up and down in front of it, but Harry could not make out whether it was Old King Brady or Kit Burns.

When one swims in the dark one can scarcely tell how they go.

Harry could have sworn that he had covered the distance of at least a quarter of a mile from the raft.

It was not so, however.

There it lay not two hundred yards from where he stood.

"Great Scott! If I had known that I should have put in even a worse night than I did," thought Young King Brady. "It's a wonder the hermit didn't get me; but he seems to have taken himself off altogether. I'll take a sneak up there, I guess."

He walked on to the raft.

But the hermit had got on his nerves, and the horror of the night had not left him yet.

His fears were groundless, for when he reached the raft Mr. Hermit still remained invisible.

Gus Fielding lay where he had fallen, with the rifle and lantern by his side.

"Upon my word, those fellows made a bad break when they went gunning for me," thought Young King Brady. "Still, it is none of my funeral. The thing to do now is to find that unfortunate girl."

He picked up the rifle, and much as he disliked the job proceeded to search the dead man.

He wanted his revolver, and he got it.

This done, he turned away, and started along the shore in the direction of the tent.

Now he could see two figures moving about.

Old King Brady and Kit were taking down the tent.

"They are getting ready for a move," thought Harry

"I only wish I could attract their attention."

He would have fired his rifle if he had dared.

But he knew that the towering cliffs would send the echo of the shot all over the lake, and he did not care to take chances of attracting the hermit.

He waved his hat again and again, but so far as any response went it would seem that his signal was not seen.

"I can't do a thing about it," thought Harry. "I can only hope that the Governor comes this way—that's all."

He kept his eyes upon them as he hurried on, and when the start was finally made he had the satisfaction of seeing that it was in his direction.

"That's all right," thought Harry. "This isn't so bad. As for those two fellows, they richly deserved what they got, and I can see no reason why I should bother my head with them."

He hurried on. The beach was broad, but it was rough walking, on account of the lava which lay strewn everywhere.

As he advanced he presently saw ahead of him the remains of a fire. There was a coffee pot and some pans lying around.

"Can this be their camp?" he thought. "I must look sharp. The girl may be here."

He started on the run, and soon gained the spot, but even before he reached it he saw the mouth of a cave leading in under the cliff.

"This is surely the place!" muttered Harry, and he turned in toward the cave.

The entrance was high, and the cave appeared to be of considerable depth.

"What if this should be the hermit's holdout?" he thought.

But something had to be done.

Clutching his rifle, Harry pushed on into the cave.

"Is anyone here?" he called.

"I am here!" was the instant reply.

The voice was a woman's, to Young King Brady's immense relief.

It was Bella Wandell.

Harry came upon her a minute later.

The poor girl, with her hands securely tied behind her, lay upon blankets in a corner of the cave.

At the sight of Harry she gave a joyful cry.

"Oh, Mr. Brady! Have you come to save me?" she exclaimed.

Then her feelings seemed to overcome her, for she burst into tears.

Harry made short work of her bonds.

Pulling out his knife, he cut the cords, and assisted Bella to her feet.

"Calm yourself," he said. "I am here to help you out of this."

"My brother?" cried Bella. "What about him?"

"He is alive. We left him in Hangtown. Unfortunately, three of his ribs were broken by the fall, but he will be about again. How is it with you?"

"I wasn't hurt. But, oh, how I have suffered since! They will come—they will kill you!"

"No, they won't. Prepare for a surprise. Gus Fielding and his companion are dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. Shot by the hermit who prowls about these mountains."

"Thank heaven for it! Oh, Mr. Brady, Fielding was a dreadful man! And just to think of it! I once imagined that I loved him. How could he use me so?"

"Don't think of it. Has he injured you in any way?"

"No, no! Except that he kept me a prisoner! And then the dreadful walk up to this place! I thought I should die!"

"Come," said Harry. "You want to forget all this. Let us go and meet Old King Brady. You are safe now, and we shall see to it that you don't fall into trouble again."

But Bella was not to be put off so easily.

She wanted to know everything, and Harry told her all as they walked along.

As for her own adventures, she did not seem disposed to say much about them.

Young King Brady did not press the subject.

He felt that the poor girl had suffered enough.

They had not gone far before Old King Brady and Kit Burns were seen coming toward them.

Harry waved his hat, and this time his signal was seen.

A few minutes later and the detectives came together on the beach.

The talk which followed need not be detailed.

Kit Burns was open in his expressions of joy at the death of his enemies.

Old King Brady had a reproving word for Harry for his carelessness in allowing himself to be captured, and so it went.

But all realized that hunting the hermit was a more dangerous operation than they had at first imagined.

"Wherever he keeps himself, he seems to be liable to drop on our neck at any moment like a wildcat," remarked Old King Brady. "We have got to watch out sharp after ourselves, or we shall meet the fate of these two men."

"Don't you think that under the circumstances we had better get right back to Hangtown with Miss Wandell?" Harry asked, drawing Old King Brady to one side.

"We must certainly go," was the reply. "This is no place for a woman. We shall have to see her safe, and then begin again."

But to this Bella, considerably to their surprise, objected.

"Of course, I will do whatever you wish me to, Mr. Brady," she said when the old detective mentioned the plan, "but I am sure I don't want to hamper you. I am not a bit afraid to remain here with you a few days and take whatever risk comes your way."

"I could not consent to it," replied Old King Brady. "But I would like to postpone our going a few hours if

you would be willing to remain at the cave under the care of Mr. Burns."

Bella was willing to do anything, but Kit did not seem to relish the job very well.

Still, he consented, and Old King Brady and Harry returned to the raft.

The old detective was anxious to study the lay of the land near where the tragedy had occurred.

"This Badman Bill is clearly a lunatic," he said, as they walked along, "and as such we may be able to catch him napping. Such as he rarely sleep nights. Such slumber as they catch is generally in the early morning, and my theory is that if we look sharp we may catch him napping now."

"I'm ready for anything, Governor! After my lucky escape I don't expect to die this trip."

"You'll die when your time comes, and not a minute before. Did Fielding have anything to say about the hermit?"

"Not much to me. He talked of him in a general way to Dillard."

"Did he mention how he and Dillard managed to get down into this crater?"

"Indeed he did not. He seemed to be greatly surprised that we should have been able to get down any way but his way, but he did not say what that was."

"We must look into it. My idea is before we leave here to follow the lake all the way around."

"We ought to be sure to come to it that way."

"Exactly. But here we are at the raft. Your dead man don't seem to have been disturbed."

"He lies exactly as he dropped last night. He was shot through the heart."

"The biter bit! Yes, that is the tallest of our two dynamiters sure. Did you search him?"

"Only to get my revolver."

"We had better go through him, then. We may be able to find some evidence that this man Muldoon was in the plot, and we want that if we can get it. The Wells Fargo Company will be interested, I think."

And so Old King Brady himself undertook the distasteful task.

The result was exactly as he had predicted.

The search brought to light a letter from Muldoon which was amply strong to convict him.

A trifle of money, a long knife, and another revolver were the only things of value found in addition upon the dead man.

"And what shall we do with him?" demanded Harry.

"Leave him where he is," replied Old King Brady. "When we return we may bury him, or we may find someone in Hangtown who cares enough about him to come after his corpse. But now to take one look for the hermit's holdout. If we don't find it within an hour I shall give up for this trip, and start on the back track."

CHAPTER X.

THE CAPTURE OF THE HERMIT.

Old King Brady turned away from the raft and faced the towering cliffs.

The old detective is a great hand to reason out a theory, and Harry saw that he had one of his reasoning fits upon him now.

So Harry said nothing for a few minutes, but stood quietly by and let his partner do his thinking.

"Just where did he stand when you saw him?" Old King Brady suddenly asked.

"You mean the hermit?"

"Sure! Who else?"

"I was trying to think."

"Well, get your thinking cap right at work, then; all depends upon that."

Harry looked around, and then walked over to a point close to the cliffs.

"I should say it was about here," he called.

Old King Brady came to the place and studied the cliff long and earnestly.

"Had you been showing a light? By you I mean Fielding or Dillard," he asked.

"We hadn't until just the moment when we first saw him."

"Then the chances are he had no particular warning of your coming."

"It looks that way."

"It is so. If he had known those fellows were here he would have gone straight to the cave after that girl, in all probability."

"Likely."

"It's sure. For a man to turn hermit he must necessarily be a woman hater."

"I suppose so."

"It is so. If he would have shot two men off-hand the way he did he surely would have killed the girl, all of which goes to show that he came from some point beyond here. Come on. Our way lies so."

They walked on slowly.

In a few moments Old King Brady suddenly halted and pulled out his glass.

"By Jove, we have located him for a fact!" he said, in a half-whisper.

"What do you see?" demanded Harry.

"Bones!"

"What?"

"Bones, I tell you. Look ahead there!"

Harry took the glass and saw lying on the beach at some little distance ahead of them a pile of bones, the horns of deer, and similar rubbish.

"We are close upon him," said Old King Brady. "It is just like a fellow of his sort to throw his rubbish and not to take the trouble to throw it into the lake."

"We must go slow, Governor. If you had seen him last night you would be better able to realize what a dangerous man he is."

"Oh, I realize all right. We are going to find him, and we are going to find him asleep."

They pushed on to the rubbish pile, and again halted.

Here a stunted tree grew near the cliffs.

There seemed to be no break of any kind in the rocky wall, however.

Old King Brady stood looking up, but Harry stepped in behind the tree.

He had left his rifle with Kit Burns, thinking that it might be needed to defend Bella.

It would have been better if he had drawn his revolver now, but he didn't.

There, half concealed by the tree, he saw the entrance to a cave.

Harry peered in. The temptation was too strong to resist.

Instantly he saw that they had tracked the hermit to his den.

The man lay sprawled upon a rude couch asleep, to all appearance.

A lantern hung over him, burning dimly.

Near by were two iron-bound chests.

One was closed and the other open, revealing a number of bags.

Upon the floor lay strewn a number of twenty-dollar goldpieces.

It was the golden trail again!

Harry drew back, and passing out from behind the bush, made a sign to Old King Brady.

The sign meant success.

Old King Brady knew that the hermit was found.

He pressed forward, but Harry was ahead of him.

Secure in his belief that the hermit was asleep, as, indeed, he may have been when Harry first went in, he re-entered the cave without fear.

There stood Badman Bill snapping and snarling like some wild beast.

He had taken one of the bags out of the chest, and now he let it fly.

Harry got the bag in the forehead and fell, the gold scattering over the floor of the cave.

"Hold on there, you fiend! No more of that, or you are a dead one!" shouted Old King Brady, darting forward, for the hermit had pulled two more bags from the chest.

The old detective's warning was without effect.

Both bags were thrown.

Old King Brady might have had his brains dashed out if he had not nimbly dodged.

Instantly he threw himself upon the hermit, calling to Harry for help.

Old King Brady particularly wanted to take this singular being alive.

None knows better than the old detective how to get a strangle hold upon a man and throw him.

And he was entirely successful.

Great as the strength of this madman undoubtedly was, Old King Brady's skill prevailed.

He had Badman Bill on his back in an instant.

Harry, who was merely half stunned, sprang to his feet and covered the fellow with his revolver.

But Old King Brady could not trust the madman's fear of the weapon altogether.

He choked him to insensibility, and then snapped the handcuffs on.

Working with lightning quickness, he bound his arms in front of him, and so tied his legs together.

The hermit revived just as he had completed these preparations.

The Bradys stepped back, waiting to see what he might have to say.

"By jove, it's a good job he went for us only with those gold bags!" remarked Harry. "See those two rifles! If he had taken a notion to use one of these I might be where Gus Fielding is now."

"Where on earth did he get all this gold coin, I wonder?" queried the old detective, looking around.

Meanwhile the hermit was eyeing them, but he did not speak.

Every now and then he would give an animal-like snarl, and snap his jaws like a wolf.

"Will you speak to him?" whispered Harry.

"Wait a minute. See what he does," replied the old detective.

But the hermit only kept up his snapping and snarling, uttering not a word.

Suddenly Old King Brady exclaimed:

"You are Badman Bill, the stage robber! Isn't that so?"

There was no answer.

The same snapping and snarling kept up, but that was all.

Old King Brady tried him with several questions, but not a word would he utter.

The detectives had placed him in a sitting position, with his back against the wall of the cave.

From this he did not seem to be able to rise, although he made several attempts.

"What shall we do?" questioned Harry.

"It's a puzzler to know what to do," replied Old King Brady. "Let us examine these chests."

They opened several of the bags.

Some contained nuggets, some gold dust. None of those examined contained coin.

The second chest was not fastened.

It proved to contain bags like the other.

Two or three of these were opened.

One was filled with \$20 gold pieces.

Two others opened were filled with nuggets.

The Bradys went no further.

They now gathered up the coins and filled their pockets.

Old King Brady expected that this would start the hermit talking, but no!

He kept up his snarling and snapping, but no question Old King Brady could put brought an answer.

The Bradys now went out into the open.

"We seem to have our hands full," remarked the old detective. "I'll be blest if I know what to do."

"It's a puzzler," replied Harry. "If we could only trust Burns to watch him we might go to Hangtown for help."

"Burns is not to be trusted with all that gold in sight."

"I should say not."

"Certainly not. Let me think. The fact that we have the girl on our hands greatly complicates matters."

They walked on in silence, retracing their steps toward the other cave.

"Here is my plan," said Old King Brady, before they reached it. We will say nothing of our discovery either to Kit or the girl."

"Good!"

"We will all start around the lake, and find, if we can, the way Fielding and Dillard got in. Failing that, we will return to the lip of the crater by the way we came. You, Kit and the girl shall go to Hangtown. If Baxter is on his way here you will meet him and return with him. If not you will see him at the mine, and bring him here with men and horses."

"And you?"

"Will remain to guard the hermit and the treasure."

Harry offered no objection, for in all such matters Old King Brady's will is law.

They had now reached the raft.

"Miss Wandell must not see that body," said Old King Brady. "Help me to carry it in among the bushes which grow under the rocks over there."

This was done, and they pushed on to the cave.

"Any luck?" asked Kit, who was standing outside talking to Bella.

"No," replied Old King Brady. "We have discovered no way out. I have concluded that we will all take a walk around the crater and go out by the way we came in, if we find no better road."

"Then you mean to return to Hangtown?" demanded Kit.

"Miss Wandell must go there. I will stay here and continue my search for the hermit. If you will go with my partner and help him see this lady safe at her brother's side I shall be greatly obliged."

Kit raised no objection, nor did Bella, after a few remarks about not wishing to put the detectives to trouble.

The distance around the lake Old King Brady thought could scarcely exceed three miles.

Bella made light of this, as she did the walk to Hangtown.

"I'm well used to walking. I can do twenty miles, if necessary."

And so they started, and pushed on around the lake. When they passed the hermit's cave not a sound was heard within.

Harry could hardly restrain his curiosity to look inside and see how matters stood.

But they walked on, Kit little dreaming that he was so near his friend Badman Bill.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE MERCY OF A MADMAN.

"This looks like it!"

"Certainly there is a pass here."

It was Old King Brady who made the first remark.

He had come to a standstill at a place where there was a narrow break in the rocky wall of the crater.

Harry, answering, entered and stood looking around.

The others followed.

The break was about five feet in width.

It extended upward at a steep inclination.

It seemed to wind in and out between the rocky walls. They could only see along its length a short distance.

They had passed about half the distance around the lake when they came upon this break in the towering cliffs.

"I believe we have hit it," said Kit Burns. "But I can't imagine where it comes out above."

"Have you passed all around the crater on top?" questioned Old King Brady.

Kit admitted that he had not, so the matter seemed to be scarcely worth discussing.

"We will make a try at it," said the old detective. "If it leads nowhere, why, back we come—that is all."

So they started up this curious canyon, if it can be so styled.

It led in and out, winding now to the right and now to the left in the most remarkable fashion.

At no point was it impassable for horses.

At last they came up against cliffs which would have blocked their way, but here there was another cave.

The passage now passed underground, so to speak.

The Bradys got out their dark lanterns, and they pushed on underground.

But they had not far to go.

Suddenly daylight was seen ahead, and they soon came out through a narrow opening, which was almost concealed by bushes.

They were on the edge of the forest overlooking a deep valley.

"Hangtown, by gracious!" cried Kit.

There, sure enough, lay the little mining town nestled in the valley far below them.

"Why, I know this place well!" declared Kit. "It's not

over three miles from here, and an easy walk enough going down, although it is a pretty stiff climb coming up."

"I leave you here," said Old King Brady. "See Miss Wandell safe, Harry, and then come back to me. Kit, I suppose you will return, too?"

"Sure," replied Kit. "Look out the hermit don't catch you while we are gone."

"I'm not a bit afraid," replied the old detective. "But if you don't return our bargain is off."

He bade Bella good-by, and stood watching as the three disappeared down the slope.

"I can only hope Harry don't pass Mr. Baxter and his men," thought the old detective, as he turned away. "It would be a shame to have this business miscarry now that we have got so far on the road to success."

He turned back, and re-entering the cave, now retraced his steps down to the lake.

"Shall I find my man there?" he asked himself.

Old King Brady had his doubts, and yet the hermit had been very carefully tied.

He lost no time in getting back to the hermit's cave.

Standing for a moment by the tree, he listened.

No sound could be heard within.

"It can't be that he has managed to free himself," thought Old King Brady.

And yet no one knew better than he what unusual things a madman will do.

Drawing his revolver, he entered the cave.

There sat Badman Bill, just as Old King Brady had left him.

His eyes were closed, and to all appearance he was asleep.

"Hello, there!" shouted the old detective.

The eyes opened, and the hermit regarded Old King Brady with a sleepy stare.

"So you are back again?" he growled.

"Back again. You are feeling a little more sociable than when I left. You are ready to talk now?"

"Yes. I am quiet now. He is gone."

"Who do you mean?"

"The black man."

"I don't understand you. What black man do you refer to?"

"The black man who gets inside of me. You can't see him, but I can. He comes every once in a while."

"Oh, I understand. Some invisible friend of yours."

"He is no friend. He is my worst enemy. When he gets hold of me I never talk. I can't. He won't let me."

"Try and forget him."

"Forget him! If I only could! But never mind. Don't let us talk about him. Tell me who you are and why you have tied me up like this?"

It was really remarkable how completely the man's face had changed.

But it was all in the expression. Otherwise it was the same, dirty, bearded face.

While before it had resembled the face of some wild

beast, now the man's whole appearance was mild, and his eyes had a mournful, pleading expression about them which was almost pitiful to see.

"Why don't you untie me? Why don't you take off these handcuffs?" he demanded. "Why do you stand there with that revolver? Are you afraid of me? Don't you know I wouldn't hurt a fly?"

"No, I don't know it, my friend," said Old King Brady.

He put up the revolver, however, for the hermit was to all appearance perfectly secured.

"You see," he added, "one can't tell at what minute the black man may get hold of you again. You are pretty fierce then. One has to be prepared."

"Well, that's right. But who are you?"

"I am a detective. I am here to arrest you if you want the truth."

"Is that so? What have I done?"

"Perhaps it wasn't you, but the black man who held up the Wells Fargo treasure stage five years ago, killed the driver, and got away with a lot of gold, of which I suspect this in these chests is a part."

"No, no! I know nothing about that. I am a quiet man. I live alone in these mountains. I wouldn't do anything like that."

"Where did you get this gold?"

"I don't know. It isn't mine. It belongs to the black man. I throw it about, but he picks it up and puts it back into the bags. I wish I could get rid of it. Sometimes I think I'll throw it all into the lake."

"What is your name?"

"My name?"

"Yes."

"They used to call me Badman Bill when I worked in the mines down in Nevada, but that was on account of the black man. He was always getting hold of me and making me quarrel. Personally I'm the quietest man you ever saw."

"Never mind the black man. Tell me your name."

"William Williams was my father's name. It's mine, too. Can you speak Welsh?"

"No, I can't."

"I'm sorry. I could talk to you better in Welsh."

"You are a Welshman, then?"

"Yes. I learned mining in Wales. I was all right there. I came to Nevada and worked on the Comstock. I was nine years a foreman on the Consolidated Virginia, and I worked three years for the Gould and Curry people. It was there that the accident happened."

"The accident? What was that?"

"A big beam fell on my head. I was laid up in the hospital for a long time. It was there that the black man got hold of me. I was bothered with him right along after that."

It was a clear case enough.

The hermit was evidently a dangerous lunatic.

Old King Brady questioned him further and learned—if the story could be believed—that the man did not stick

to the mountains all the time, but frequently paid visits to Seattle and other places.

He stated that he now never went to Hangtown because the "black man" had ordered him not to and had threatened to kill him if he did.

His talk was all in the same vein and will not be given in full.

At last he asked the detective to set him free.

"You can take the gold," he said. "I don't care what you do with it. I have been trying to get rid of the stuff for years, but it won't leave me. Only thing is don't take me away from these mountains, where I have lived so long."

"We will see about that," was the reply. "But I can't set you free yet, my poor friend. Later we will see what can be done."

The old detective now determined to continue his explorations.

Before starting it seemed only prudence to make sure that the hermit's bonds were secure.

"Perhaps I can loosen these cords a little, and so make it easier for you," he said.

He had no real intention, however, of running any such risk.

All he wanted was to make certain that they were secure.

He stepped forward and was about to examine the leg cords, stooping for the purpose, when suddenly the hermit, with a fearful yell, threw up his hands and brought the handcuffs down upon Old King Brady's head.

He had gnawed the cords almost through, as afterwards developed.

It was so with the bonds about his legs.

He sprang to his feet and with the exception of the handcuffs was free.

It was a crashing blow.

The only wonder was that Old King Brady's skull was not fractured.

But the old detective seemed to scent what was coming and tried to dodge.

The result was that the handcuffs glanced off to a certain extent.

Half stunned, and with a severe scalp wound, Old King Brady sank down nearly unconscious.

He could just hold himself together, and no more.

He thought that his last moment in life had surely come.

"Shall I kill him? Shall I kill him? I can't hear

what you say. Shall I kill him?" he heard the hermit yell.

Was he talking to the imaginary "black man?" It would seem so.

"You tell me not to kill him?" he instantly added. "Well, I must do what you say. He ought to be killed, though."

He bent down over Old King Brady, and with his hands, manacled as they were, began feeling in his pockets as best he could.

Old King Brady could not do a thing.

The blood was pouring from the scalp wound on his head.

And now everything began to buzz and faintness seized the old detective.

For a moment or two he thus lay there dead to the world.

When consciousness returned he saw the hermit standing near the mouth of the cave.

Evidently there was much method in this man's madness.

He had in some way managed to get the key to the handcuffs, which was in Old King Brady's vest pocket.

He held the key between his teeth and was trying to open the handcuffs.

At the same instant the detective caught the sound of horses outside.

Had Harry returned?

Was rescue at hand?

The handcuffs dropped off and fell ringing to the floor of the cave.

"Horses! Horses!" shouted the hermit. "Who dares to bring horses down here into my peaceful valley?"

He pulled out a revolver.

It was Old King Brady's—the rifles, all but one, had gone with Harry. That one the detective had left standing outside the cave.

"I'm done for!" thought Old King Brady.

He fully expected a shot.

But the hermit had no such intention.

His wrath now was directed against the newcomers, whoever they might be.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" he shouted, and then rushed out into the open.

A moment later there was a shot.

Shouts followed.

With them came a horrible yell and another shot.

Then all was still.

"Somebody is doing business out there," thought Old King Brady.

He tried to rise, and did finally manage to get upon his feet.

But it was only to be seized by the faintness again.

Old King Brady dropped back upon the floor of the cave once more, dead to the world.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Harry, with Kit Burns and Bella Wandell, reached Hangtown without mishap.

Bella was at once taken to the house where her brother lay.

Arthur Wandell was still in a high fever and out of his head.

Bella promptly declared her intention of remaining with him.

Finding that he could be of no assistance, Young King Brady soon left, expecting to find Kit Burns waiting for him downstairs.

But the prospector had taken his departure, and when Harry came to look him up he found him in Bausch's saloon filling up.

Kit was boasting of his adventures in the mountains and telling how he was going back to help the Bradys catch Badman Bill.

Seeing that the case was hopeless, Harry, after a few minutes, made an excuse to get out and forgot to return.

He hurried to the Kicking Mule.

Here he found Mr. Baxter in the office attending to business.

The superintendent was cordial enough when Young King Brady told him who he was.

"Well, say!" he exclaimed, "so those fellows deserted and robbed you?"

"That's what they did."

"Confound them! You can never depend upon anybody nowadays. It is too bad. I'm afraid Mr. Brady will have it in for me. But no matter. I was tied by the leg yesterday, but I'm all right to-day. Of course, I will help you. I'll get a force together and be with you right now in two shakes."

All this the superintendent rattled off before Harry had a chance to get in a dozen words.

"There is more to tell," he said. "We have captured Badman Bill."

"So?" cried Baxter. "Well, well! Perhaps you don't want my help then?"

"Oh, but we do. We want it bad. Just hear me out and you will know then how the case stands."

This time Young King Brady was allowed to finish his story.

"Well, you two are certainly all right," declared Mr. Baxter. "You have disposed of a mystery which has bothered Hangtown these five years, to say nothing of all the rest you have done. Go with you? Sure! Just give me half an hour and we'll start for your lake with a wagon to carry the gold if you think we can get it down there, and a guard of half a dozen men."

This, of course, suited Young King Brady exactly.

Mr. Baxter proved as good as his word.

Inside of half an hour the start was made.

The wagon was a stout two-wheeled affair, especially adapted to mountain travel.

So they took the trail by which Harry had come down and pushed on up the mountain side.

* * * * *

Old King Brady was revived from his second fainting fit by a pan of water being dashed into his face.

When he recovered from the shock of this violent remedy he saw standing over him the three miners, Nugent, Welch and Taylor.

"Well, and what's the matter with you?" demanded the former. "Who gave you that crack over the head?"

Old King Brady pulled himself up to a sitting position.

The worst was over with him and his strength was now beginning to return.

"Well, boys, so we meet again?" he said. "I hope it is as friends. I need a friend now the worst kind of way."

But he had no such hopes.

Old King Brady was now sparring for wind, so to speak.

Many of the gold bags had been taken from the chests and stood about with their contents exposed.

"It's all up with me unless I can jolly these fellows," he thought.

He had no doubt that they had shot the hermit, and he felt that it would probably be his turn next.

"Friends nothing," growled Welch. "We have got nothing against you, old man, but we are out for busi-

ness. There is no such thing as friends in business, as you very well know."

"Well, well, boys. You are three husky fellows against one wounded old man. There is no need of argument under the circumstances, I should say."

"Not much," laughed Bill Taylor. "Were you shot by this Badman Bill?"

"No; hit over the head with those handcuffs you see lying over there."

"So? They make a bad wound. How did it happen?"

"Well, I captured him, but he turned the tables on me. It's a long story, and I am rather weak just now. By the way, you didn't see anything of the fellow, I suppose?"

"Didn't we? You just look here," retorted Nugent.

He seized hold of Old King Brady by the arm, Welch catching him by the other.

In this way they led him out of the cave.

And there the old detective saw just what he expected to see.

Stretched upon the stones of the beach lay the dead body of Badman Bill.

He had been shot through the heart.

The same fate which he had dealt out to Gus Fielding and Joe Dillard had come to him.

The horses of which Old King Brady had been robbed the night before were hobbled nearby.

"You see, old man," said Nugent, who was the most talkative of the two, "we started out prospecting. I think we have struck a putty rich load."

"And no digging about it, neither," added Welch.

"Except to dig out," laughed Taylor.

"Exactly," said Nugent. "I suppose, Brady, you think we followed you?"

"My dear fellow, I'm not thinking. My head hurts me too bad for that," the old detective replied. "You have got there. I've got left, so there you are. What's the use talking any more about it?"

"Right you are," chuckled Nugent.

"I would like to know what finished the hermit, however."

"Oh, you would, would you? Well, I'll tell you. There were three shots fired by three prospectors. One of them put your Badman Bill out of business, see?"

"Do you know I think you have had pretty good luck."

"We think so. We didn't follow you, I'll tell you that for your satisfaction. We struck the trail which leads in

here by pure accident. You know how rich we struck it in the end."

"Yes, yes!" said Old King Brady, wearily. "Well, boys, don't keep me in suspense. Where do I come in on this deal?"

"That's what we want to decide," replied Nugent. "We have no grudge against you, but at the same time we don't want you turning against us."

"Let me go and I'll hobble off about my business. What can a wounded man do against you three?"

"That's all very well, but we know the reputation of the Bradys for getting there. I don't think that will go."

"It's up to you."

"Where's your partner?"

"I'll be perfectly frank with you. We discovered the young lady we were searching for. He escorted her to Hangtown while I remained here."

"He did, eh? Then he will be coming back again, and like enough bring others with him."

"It will be hours before he can return."

And this would have been true enough if Harry had gone the long road to Hangtown.

Old King Brady had spent nearly an hour in his conversation with the hermit.

Fully two hours had elapsed since he parted from Harry.

He had strong hope that he might even now be on his way back to the lake.

"Brady," said Nugent, "we talked your case out to a finish before we brought you out of your fit. I'm sorry to inform you that we have decided it won't pay to let you live."

"Is that so?"

"It is so."

"And that don't suit me very well."

"I presume not. Still it can't be helped. Yes, old man, there is altogether too much risk in letting you live, and so we are going to shoot you, but we will give you half an hour to say your prayers in and so to prepare for death."

"Kind! Well, I suppose I must take it as it comes."

"You will have to. We have been through you. We have got your knife and revolver. You are helpless in our hands."

Old King Brady tried to argue, for every moment of delay was precious.

It was no use, however.

Nugent and Welsh now tied him to the tree and all three went into the cave.

Old King Brady's situation had now become desperate.

In his weak condition he could do nothing.

His only hope was now in Harry.

The moments passed.

He could hear the three prospectors talking, but he could not distinguish words.

Louder and louder their voices were raised.

Evidently they were quarreling over a division of the spoils.

And now all at once Old King Brady's ears caught other sounds, which gave him hope.

"Horses!" he murmured. "Some one coming! Can it be Harry at last? If only they don't hear!"

That was the time he thanked his lucky star for the quarrel inside.

Not until the horses were almost upon them did the three wretches in the cave hear their approach.

Old King Brady could not see.

His back was turned towards the approaching horses.

Out of the cave the three men came running.

"Great guns! It's Baxter!" Nugent cried.

They had left their rifles further down the shore, where their horses were hobbled, and they started for them on the run.

"Hold there, or you are dead men!"

It was Harry's voice.

"Hands up! Halt or we fire!"

This time it was Superintendent Baxter who called.

The game was up.

Half a dozen shots sent over the heads of the three scoundrels brought them to a halt and immediate surrender.

Right in the nick of time Harry had come to the rescue.

Old King Brady was saved!

* * * * *

As for the rest it need not take long in the telling.

Mr. Baxter was a typical Westerner.

Even if the Bradys had not been there to suggest he would have known just what to do.

The prisoners were promptly secured, and Old King Brady was with equal promptness released.

The old detective's story was soon told.

"You treacherous dogs!" cried Baxter. "We'll fix you.

Horse stealing may be enough, but if it isn't a murder charge will finish the business."

Soon after the cart arrived.

It had not been difficult to get it through the pass.

The gold was loaded on, and with the prisoners, was safely landed at Hangtown.

On a second trip the body of Badman Bill and also that of Gus Fielding were brought from the nameless lake, and this at the Bradys' request.

The hermit was photographed and the picture subsequently identified by several who had seen him before the hold-up.

Old King Brady paid the expense of his burial. Fielding's remains were taken in charge by a friend.

In due time the Bradys landed the gold safely at Seattle, where the Wells Fargo agent took charge of it.

Muldoon, at Hangtown, was profuse in his offers of assistance.

Of course, he was turned down by the detective and later was turned out by the express company.

Arthur Wandell recovered and is still living at Hangtown with his sister.

Nugent, Welch and Taylor got fifteen years each, and are still doing time.

Kit Burns was the most disgusted man on record when he got off his drunk.

The Wells Fargo Company showed their usual liberality to the detectives, and Old King Brady sent a good round sum to Hangtown to be divided among Mr. Baxter's men, but not a cent to Kit.

For without their help there would undoubtedly have been a very different ending to the case of "The Bradys and Badman Bill."

THE END.

Read "THE BRADYS AND 'OLD MAN MONEY'; OR, HUSTLING FOR WALL STREET MILLIONS," which will be the next number (388) of "Secret Service."

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